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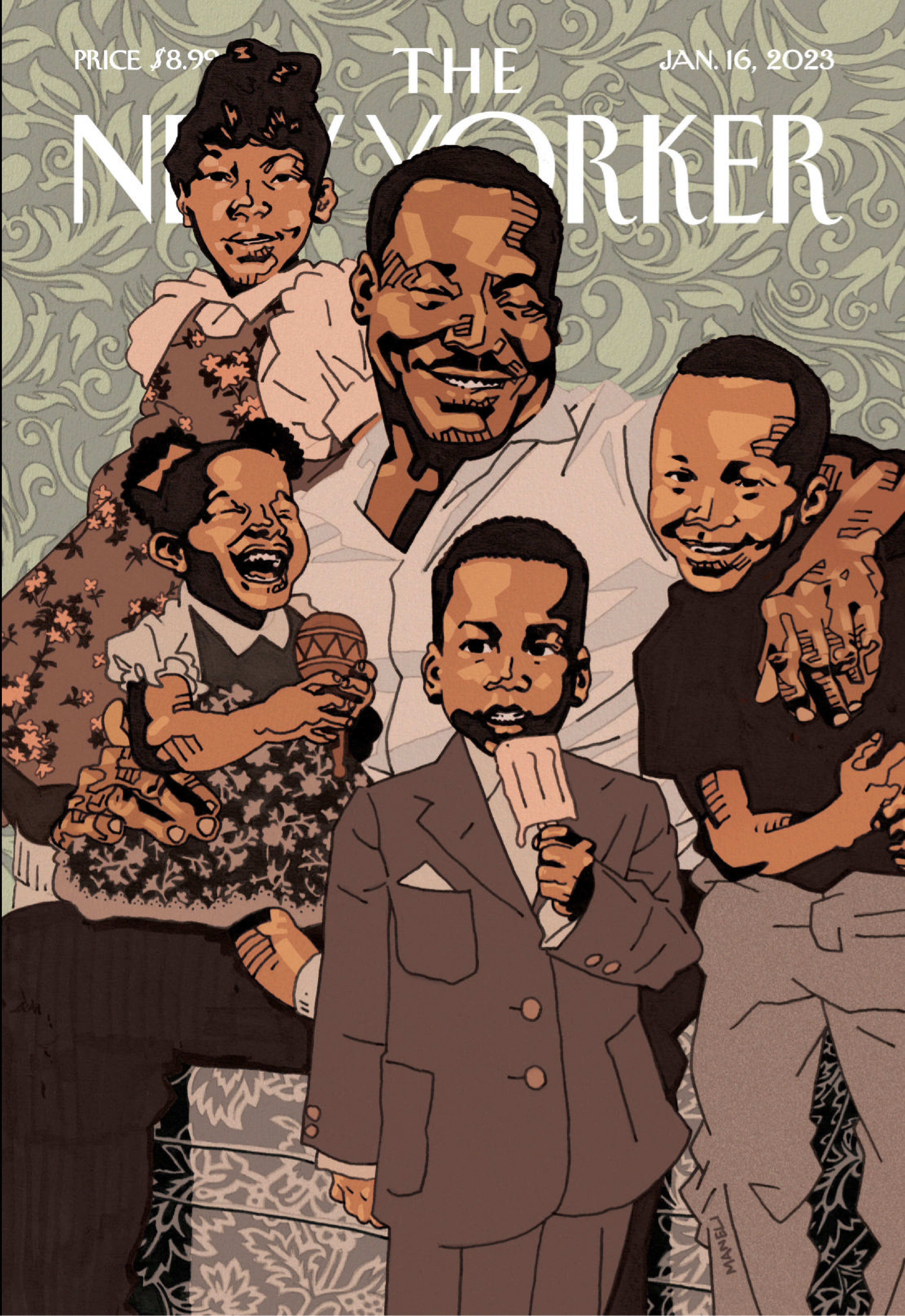

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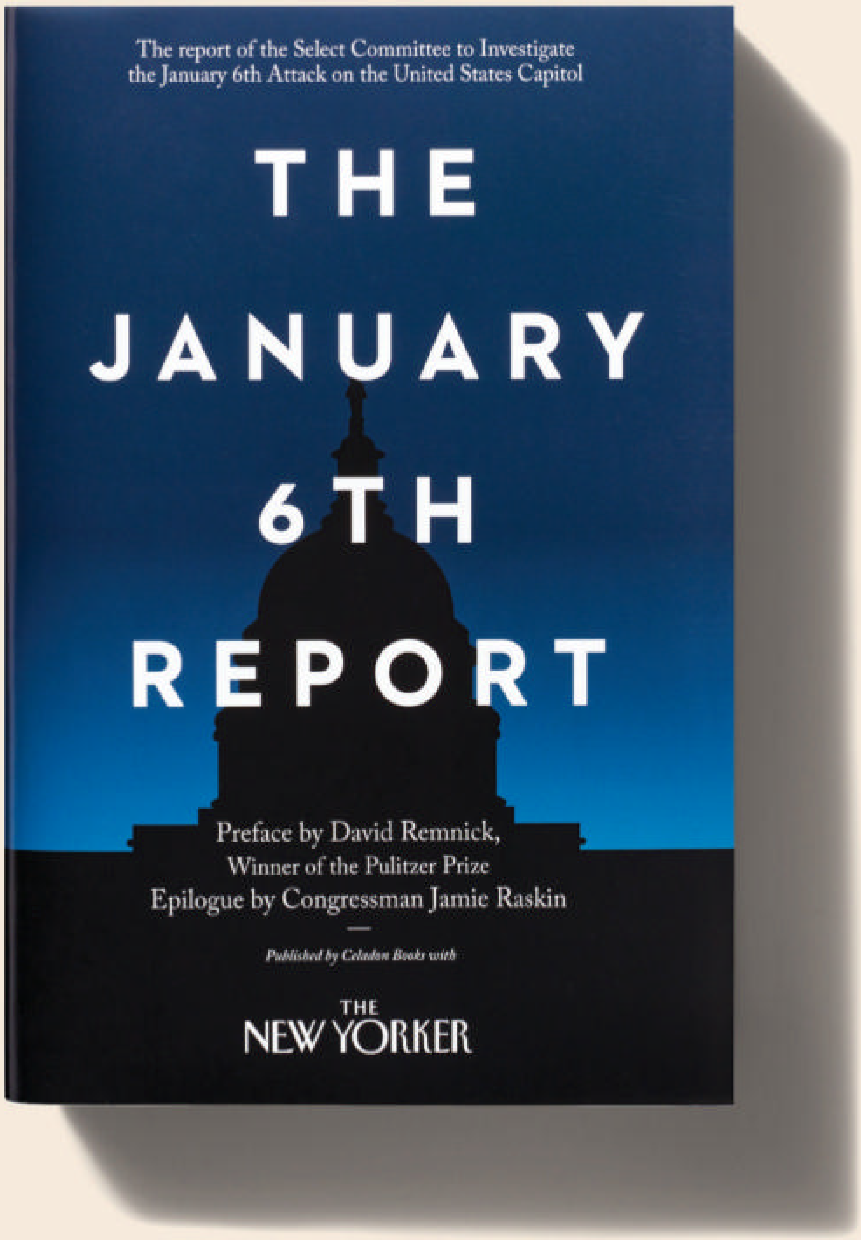
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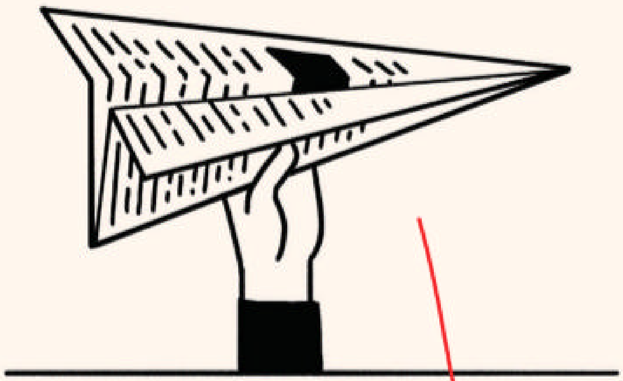

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Michael Schulman talks with the musician and actress Janelle Monáe about her role in "Glass Onion."

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LEFT: JEANETTE SPICER; RIGHT: ASHLEY PEÑA

THE MAIL

THE BIRDS AND THE TREES

I enjoyed Jerome Groopman's review of "Parasites," by Scott Gardner, Judy Diamond, and Gabor Racz, but was disappointed by his commentary on birds (Books, December 5th). He writes that, while trees offer birds shelter and protection, "birds, in most cases, don't really benefit their hosts." This may be true on the whole, but it ignores an important exception that readers should know about: insectivorous birds who mitigate the harm of tree-loving pests.

In 1994, the New York *Times* wrote about a groundbreaking study in *Ecology* which demonstrated the critical role that migratory North American songbirds play in keeping forest trees healthy. More recently, in an essay for *Living Bird* magazine, Çağan H. Şekercioğlu noted a number of studies that show how avian pest control can also increase crop yields in a variety of contexts, including apple orchards in the Netherlands, oil-palm plantations in Borneo, and coffee farms in Jamaica. In a world in which the relationship between agriculture and the environment is too often disastrously parasitic, such stories of healthy dependence are important to tell.

Claudia Egelhoff
West St. Paul, Minn.

FACTORING IN

As a partner in a consulting firm that specializes in analyzing E.S.G.—environmental, social, and governance factors—for investors, I read Sheelah Kolhatkar's profile of Vivek Ramaswamy with particular interest ("Anti-Woke, Inc.," December 19th). The widespread use of the term "E.S.G. investing" is, in my mind, misleading. At its core, E.S.G. is simply data. More specifically, it is data on a company's material commitments to things like climate policy. E.S.G. disclosures by companies help address the shortcomings of traditional quantitative measures of corporate performance (i.e., fundamental financial and accounting metrics) by including additional metrics on nonfinancial data to tell a more complete story.

Increasing numbers of investors have started integrating E.S.G. data into the screening process involved in assessing possible investments. This is part of a larger shift in the business world which seeks to find a balance between stakeholder capitalism and the foundational principles of free-market capitalism. The recent enthusiasm for stakeholder capitalism is not, as Ramaswamy suggests, the "woke" death knell of American corporations—it's the pursuit of a multidimensional and financially sustainable approach to business. Defining, assessing, measuring, and reporting on relevant E.S.G. data helps investors gain a better understanding of a company's long-term business strategy—and long-term profitability—in a period of considerable societal upheaval.

Anuj A. Shah
Cambridge, Mass.

SCHMEAR CAMPAIGN

Johanna Fateman's review of an exhibition about Jewish delicatessens mentions two Lower East Side shops: Katz's, "believed to be the oldest continuously operating deli in the country," and "its competitor, Russ & Daughters" (Goings On About Town, December 19th). These are, indeed, formidable institutions, but they do not compete. Aside from an occasional pickle, there are barely any common food items between them, in accordance with my tribe's adherence, more or less, to the Talmudic injunction against mixing dairy and meat products. Russ & Daughters deals in the former, whereas Katz's focusses extravagantly on the latter.

Alan Gotthelf
New York City

•

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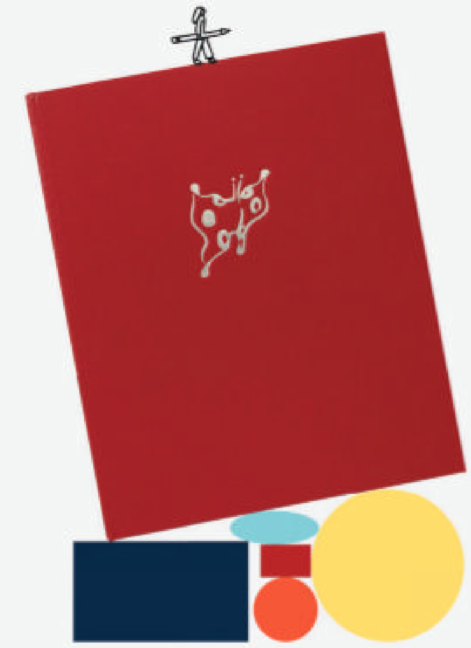

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

The Public's **Under the Radar,** now in its eighteenth installment, is a lively showcase of experimental performance. Last year's edition was scuttled by the Omicron surge, but the festival returns, through Jan. 22, with work contemplating desire, loss, queerness, chain restaurants, and King Leopold II. Among the offerings: "LatinXoxo," by the Venezuelan-born performance artist Migguel Anggelo (above), who uses Spanish boleros, comedy, and pop songs to subvert Latin-lover tropes and his own father's machismo.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUTHARAT PINYODOONYACHET

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MUSIC

Bing & Ruth

EXPERIMENTAL For more than a decade, the New York composer David Moore used his moniker, Bing & Ruth, to helm a radiant chamber ensemble that included piano, strings, woodwinds, and tape experimentation. But beginning with the LP "Species," from 2020, Moore transformed the project into a solo exploration of resonant Farfisa organ drones, which evoke such pioneers of minimalism as Terry Riley and Steve Reich. The gently splintering results suggest a quiet awe. Two compositions at the heart of that album, "Live Forever" and "The Pressure of Water," each break the ten-minute mark and layer stillness with engulfing arpeggiation, producing a spirit of existential grandeur. He performs a solo organ set as part of a January series, featuring free Tuesday-evening concerts, at this Williamsburg club.—*Jenn Pelly (Union Pool; Jan. 17.)*

"Fedora"

OPERA Umberto Giordano's "Fedora" is a little-known Italian opera from the late nineteenth century, but in many ways it is a paradigmatic one. Its efficient, color-by-number melodrama—a swirl of murder, revenge, and hot-blooded outbursts—surges repeatedly to fevered climaxes before coming to an outlandish conclusion. Yet, at the Metropolitan Opera, the conductor Marco Armiliato resists gutsy theatrics in favor of a silky and even elegant sound that gives the singers room for subtlety. Sonya Yoncheva, looking exquisite in Brigitte Reiffenstuel's costumes, embodies the tetchy Russian princess, Fedora, with a dark, full-bodied soprano that swings between poise and effortfulness, and the tenor Piotr Beczała is simply magnificent as Loris. Much like Armiliato's conducting, David McVicar's unfailingly attractive production allows Giordano's verismo crowd-pleaser the dignity of its sincerity.—*Oussama Zahr (Metropolitan Opera House; select dates Jan. 11-28.)*

Meshell Ndegeocello

SOUL In its Afrocentric exploration of American music, Meshell Ndegeocello's début album, "Plantation Lullabies," not only prompted the neo-soul movement but did so from a socially and politically awakened place. The music that she has released in the ensuing three decades runs the gamut from alt-rock and R. & B. to jazz and go-go, including, most recently, a covers record that features bold takes on Prince, Sade, Janet Jackson, and TLC. Born in Germany and raised in Washington, D.C., the multi-instrumentalist has constantly defied categorization in her pursuit of answers about identity. In concert, she is an affecting performer and an amenable leader, open to letting the members of her band express themselves in intimate, off-kilter jam sessions.—*Sheldon Pearce (Blue Note; Jan. 11-15.)*

Slam

TECHNO The Glaswegian techno duo Slam—Stuart McMillan and Orde Meikle—haven't exactly grown artistically in their three decades together, but those craving gleefully rough dance music won't find many acts who do it better. During their performances, McMillan and Meikle frequently have up to six decks going at once, yet there's little clutter in a Slam set; instead, riffs, loops, and vocal snippets take turns in the spotlight before something equally rambunctious steps up to keep the party going. The pair headlines a night that also features Denise Rabe and Auspex.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Basement; Jan. 14.)*

Winter Jazzfest

JAZZ With its dizzying multiplicity of musical idioms and cross-pollinating influences, it's a fool's game to try to define cutting-edge jazz, circa 2023. Immersing yourself in the annual Winter Jazzfest, though, is an effective way of getting a handle on this creative amalgam. Convened at various spaces throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, the weeklong fiesta (now in its nineteenth edition) unites a slew of progressive younger artists alongside a sprinkling of avant perennials and a splash of mainstream performers, among them Samara Joy, Immanuel Wilkins, Makaya McCraven, Brandee Younger, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and the Sun Ra Arkestra. Pre-concert talks, multimedia performances, and consecutive marathon nights in both boroughs are also features of this elaborate festival. Consider the potentially chilling dash among locations an essential palate cleanser between equally exhilarating sets.—*Steve Futterman (Various venues; Jan. 12-18.)*

ART

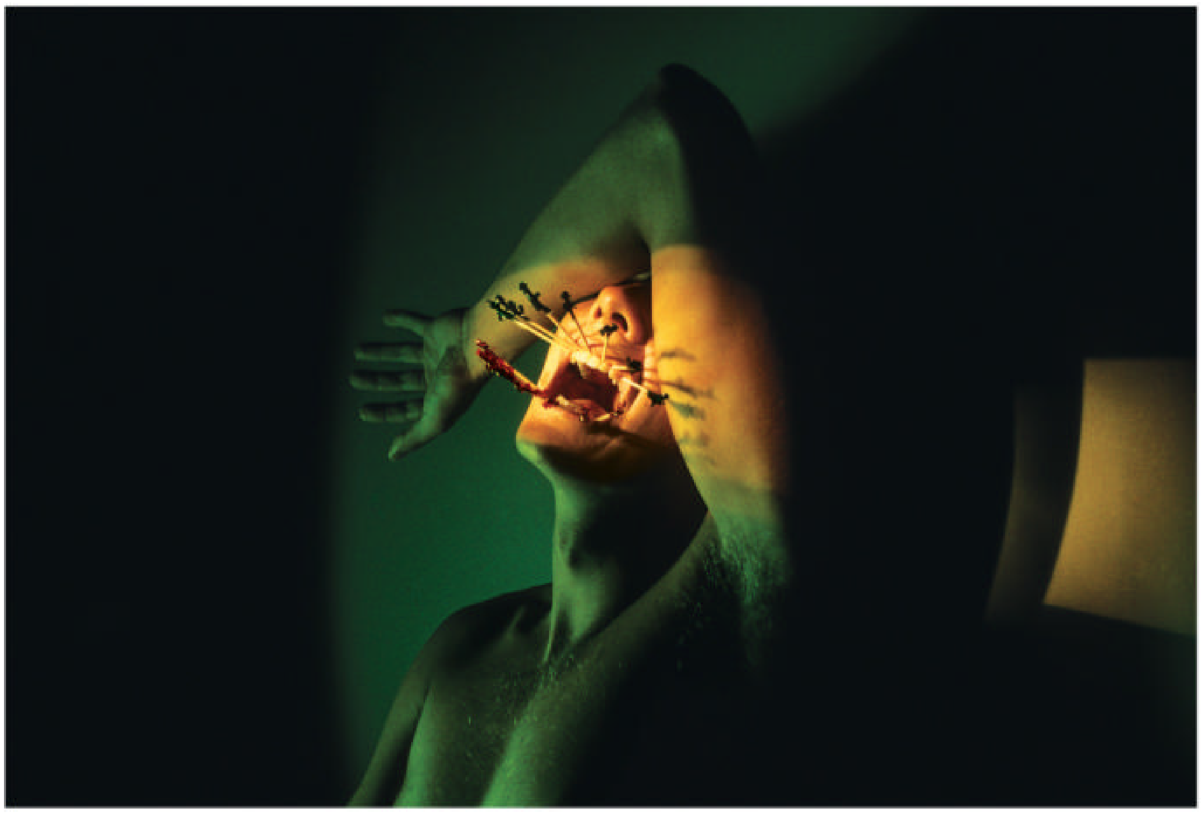
Alex Katz

"Gathering" is the title of the Guggenheim's triumphant retrospective of this nonagenarian painter, but it might easily have been "Conversations with Friends"—and not just because a stylish detail of a Katz double portrait graces the cover of Sally Rooney's novel by that name. (That daffodil-yellow canvas, from 2009, is among the more than a hundred and fifty works here.) Two subjects have absorbed the ninety-five-year-old native New Yorker across his eight-decade career: the people he loves—above all, his wife, Ada, and such close pals as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Meredith Monk—and the landscapes of Maine,

GLOBAL

Although **globalFEST** was conceived to grant artists from far-flung traditions stage time in front of music-industry types, it quickly became an open secret for that more honorable species, the civilian showgoer. Let others splurge on exotic travel; this sixty-dollar ticket leads to a head-spinning night of sounds from the world's scattered neighborhoods. On Jan. 15, the formerly itinerant festival celebrates its twentieth anniversary by settling into plush new quarters—Lincoln Center's refurbished David Geffen Hall, where three performance spaces await this year's hodgepodge. The cultural scramble extends to Bnat el Houariyat (showstopping trance music and dance from North Africa), Dengue Fever (a California band indebted to Cambodian psychedelia), the Legendary Ingramettes (deep-rooted Virginia gospel), and Moonlight Benjamin (Haitian rock). As always, the night flips conventional expectations of a concert—a person goes not to recognize a favored song but, rather, to hear a noise that they did not know existed.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

ILLUSTRATION BY PHILIP LINDEMAN



COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM / JIMMY DESANA TRUST / P.P.O.W.

Jimmy DeSana's reputation might have died when his life ended, in 1990, as a result of AIDS. He was only forty years old. The New York-based photographer was busy, prolific, and popular during his lifetime—he was included in the buzzy exhibitions "The Times Square Show" and "New York/New Wave," in the early eighties—but, in hindsight, he seemed stranded at the edge of the scene. A new retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, **"Jimmy DeSana: Submission"** (through April 16), makes a strong case for his ongoing relevance. From the beginning, DeSana's work was erotic, compulsive, gender fluid, and all the more unsettling for its comic flashes. The show opens with a wall-filling grid of fifty-six voyeuristic, black-and-white pictures from 1972—student work, made in imitation of amateur porn and flea-market snapshots. Nearby hang later examples of DeSana's stylized portraiture, featuring the likes of William S. Burroughs, Billy Idol, and Laurie Anderson. A portrait of Debbie Harry, laughing in sunglasses, appeared on the cover of the influential underground magazine *File,* under the headline "Punk 'Til You Puke." At a moment when the counterculture had come to define the culture, DeSana played a key role, turning rising stars into hipster pinups. He also dabbled in S & M, portraying unlikely collisions of bodies and objects, all luridly lit: a red high heel trapped under pantyhose, a suspended figure with his head in a foaming toilet bowl, a screaming mouth full of cocktail toothpicks ("Party Picks," from 1981, above). The effect is a cross between David Cronenberg's body horror and Guy Bourdin's fashionable fetishism. At once laughable and alarming, playful and lethal, DeSana's work still lands like a psychological time bomb.—*Vince Aletti*

where he has summered for some seventy years. One bright outlier in the exhibition, "Round Hill," from 1977, finds his friends in the endless now of a Caribbean getaway. For years, Katz was something of an outlier himself, a figurative painter who favors the flatness of Ab Ex. His style is singular, neither Pop nor Photo-Realist. His sharp eye for fashion (a chic red lip, a patterned scarf, a snazzy pair of sandals) can be deceptive. Such details are to Katz what apples were to Cézanne (whom Katz has called "the first artist I understood"): an invitation to eye the interplay of color and light, load a brush with oil, and master the depths of a painting's surface.—*Andrea K. Scott (Guggenheim Museum; through Feb. 20.)*

"Meret Oppenheim: My Exhibition"

Meret Oppenheim was eighteen years old in 1932, when she moved to Paris from Basel, Switzerland, to become what she already was—an artist of constant reinvention. (Two years earlier, she had persuaded her parents to let her drop out of school to pursue art, conveying her disdain for academics with a proto-Surrealist gem that combined drawing and algebra to prove "x=Hare.") Oppenheim arrived in Paris a painter. But it was a sculpture, from 1936, called "Object"—a cup, saucer, and teaspoon, all lined in fur—that both guaranteed her place in art history and overshadowed the glorious range of her next five decades. (Oppenheim died at the age of seventy-two, as she'd foreseen, in a dream, at thirty-six.) MOMA acquired "Object" the year it was made. Now it's among some hundred and eighty drawings, assemblages, paintings, costume designs, ceramics, and films, in a fascinating retrospective at the museum.—*A.K.S. (Museum of Modern Art; through March 4.)*

"Swagger & Tenderness: John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres"

Part of what makes this show at the Bronx Museum so remarkable is that it reminds you of two things that made New York City, predevelopment, so remarkable: chance and faith. Back in 1961, Jane Jacobs presciently argued that urban planning came at a terrible price: by obliterating communities, you obliterated the happy accidents and impromptu encounters that might expand your understanding of both an individual and a community as a whole. John Ahearn, in collaboration with Rigoberto Torres, makes plaster-cast sculptures of Black and Hispanic people he has known and admired in the four decades that he's worked in the South Bronx. He captures some of what Jacobs celebrated: the intelligence that goes into not only surviving the streets but making them feel like home. Ahearn is a great colorist, and although the skin tones of his subjects are true to life, they're also the product of his hyperrealist brush, and of his fascination with what makes a body, what makes a face, and what goes into self-representation. You can't look at an early work like "Luis and Virginia Arroyo" (1980), which shows a husband and wife in a warm embrace, and not see how much of themselves the subjects gave to the project, and how much Ahearn wanted to repay that trust—a spiritual exchange that amounts to an object lesson in faith.—*Hilton Als (Bronx Museum; through April 30.)*

Anton van Dalen

This Dutch-born artist has lived on the Lower East Side since 1966 and has trained white pigeons on his building's roof for almost as long. The birds in van Dalen's coop (which can be viewed via live stream on his Web site) also appear as abstracted silhouettes in his paintings and drawings, representing something far richer and more complex than anodyne symbols of peace. A selection of these works, spanning four decades, is on view in the spirited exhibition "Doves: Where They Live and Work." A few large, dystopian scenes, from the early eighties, address Reagan-era urban neglect and Cold War militarization in a punchy, graphic noir style. In contrast, the birds depicted in a grid of gouaches from 1989 have a simplified, heraldic quality. The beak of one ends in a hammer; another appears as an airborne blue dirigible, with a bright-red chair for a passenger seat. A radiant autobiographical painting, from 2014, depicts the artist releasing his flock on the rooftop. Highlighting themes of migration and of neighborhood communities, the panoramic view suggests that the birds' arcing path will soon merge with the traffic of Avenue A below.—*Johanna Fateman (P.P.O.W.; through Jan. 28.)*

DANCE

Bill T. Jones / Arnie Zane Company

“Curriculum II,” the latest installment in a project that began before the pandemic, explores the idea of a “planetary curriculum” that moves beyond Eurocentric models and modes of thought. (The idea was developed by the Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe.) Like many of Jones’s works, the piece is a collage of movement, sound, words, visual installation, and concepts. It combines Jones’s abstract and plainspoken choreographic language—created with his associate artistic director, Janet Wong, and the company—with narration, philosophical exposition, and song.—*Marina Harss (New York Live Arts; Jan. 10-14.)*

Uptown Underground Dance Festival

In recent years, and especially throughout the pandemic, “Works & Process,” at the Guggenheim Museum, has been supporting artists of street and social dance with funding, residencies, and multiple performances. This festival gathers and celebrates some of the fruits of those efforts, with excerpts from Music from the Sole’s “I Didn’t Come to Play,” Ephrat Asherie Dance’s “Underscored,” and Les Ballet Afrik’s “New York Is Burning.” Ladies of Hip-Hop also perform, along with Princess Lockerooo and the beatboxers and breakers of the Missing Element.—*Brian Seibert (Guggenheim Museum; Jan. 12-17.)*

Vertigo Dance Company

This Israeli company, under the direction of the choreographer Noa Wertheim, is based at an “Eco Dance Village,” a sustainable community of artists and environmentalists in the Ella Valley. To New York, Vertigo brings “PARDES”—the Hebrew word for “orchard,” derived from the Persian word for “paradise.” A group of dancers, all dressed alike, explore human and spiritual connections through an organic, free-flowing movement style.—*M.H. (Baryshnikov Arts Center; Jan. 12-14.)*

THE THEATRE

The Collaboration

The experience (call it a vibe, maybe) of watching “The Collaboration”—Anthony McCarten’s play about Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat’s famous creative partnership, directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah, for Manhattan Theatre Club—starts before the lights go down and the actors appear: as audience members file in, a d.j. onstage plays oldies from the seventies and eighties. It makes for a festive, nostalgic atmosphere. At the performance I attended, people stood up and danced. That’s probably the high point of this otherwise dreary affair. McCarten’s versions of Warhol (Paul Bettany) and Basquiat (Jeremy Pope)—who are forced into an arranged marriage by their mutual agent, Bruno (Erik Jensen)—are flattened caricatures: Warhol is uptight and scared to paint; Basquiat is cool, prolific, and exotic. The play strains hard to bring them together, then strains them through a crisis, but nothing—neither the story nor the actors’ performances—can survive this clunky characterization.—*Vinson Cunningham (Samuel J. Friedman; through Feb. 5.)*

Kate

The comedian Kate Berlant goes meta in this one-woman show, directed by Bo Burnham, which takes the premise of an autobiographical confessional and twists it like taffy. Since she was a child, in the small seaside town of Santa Monica (ever heard of it?), Kate has dreamed of being a Hollywood actress, but her mother insists that her “big, crass style of indication has no place on camera.” Can Kate overcome her self-doubt—and her career-crippling inability to cry on command? Berlant, who has a Lucille Ball-level prowess for physical comedy, plays the show’s multiple characters, as well as multiple versions of herself: the starry-eyed ingénue, the tyrannical diva, the Warholian performance artist, and, truest to life, the super-talented entertainer who has yet to find her breakout role. This isn’t quite it: the show, which runs long at eighty minutes, starts to sag with repetition, and the clever concept yields diminishing returns. What’s for sure is that Berlant is worthy of the spotlight. “She’s trying something new tonight. I respect that,” one of her characters says. So do I.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Connelly Theatre; through Feb. 10.)*

Some Like It Hot

Broadway musical adaptations of movies about cross-dressing have been like buses lately: if you missed “Tootsie,” in 2019, “Mrs. Doubtfire” was right behind it. Where each of those efforts accepted its source material’s basic premise (despite the way both had aged), the artists who adapted Billy Wilder’s classic film “Some Like It Hot”—the composer-lyricist Marc Shaiman, the lyricist Scott Wittman, the book writers Matthew López and Amber Ruffin, and the director Casey Nicholaw—have dislodged the beloved Wilder treasure from its sprockets. Now this tale—of two accidental witnesses, Joe (Christian Borle) and Jerry (J. Harrison Ghee), hiding out with an all-girl band—has a multiracial cast, including the Black bandleader Sweet Sue (NaTasha Yvette Williams, astounding) and her lead chanteuse, Sugar Kane (Adrianna Hicks). But, more important, the nonbinary performer Ghee plays Jerry, who becomes Daphne, here interpreted as a true self. “You could have knocked me over with a feather,” Ghee sings in one of the show’s finest numbers (while wearing one of the costume designer Gregg Barnes’s finest numbers), because “that lady that I’m loving is me.” The show is broad, elegant, vivid, and stuffed to the gills with tap dancing, but it’s Ghee’s expression of radiant, rapturous fulfillment that gives the show its sense of muchness.—*Helen Shaw (Reviewed in our issue of 12/26/22.) (Shubert; open run.)*

MOVIES

The Fabelmans

Steven Spielberg’s latest work begins in New Jersey in 1952, with a trip to the cinema; the whole movie, indeed, becomes a warm-blooded education in the making and watching of films. The avid learner is a Jewish boy named Sammy Fabelman, played first by Mateo Zoryon Francis-DeFord and later by Gabriel LaBelle. Sammy is ensconced within a loving home: his father, Burt (Paul Dano), and his mother, Mitzi (Michelle Williams), plus a number of siblings, and a guy named Bennie (Seth Rogen), who is always around, even when the family moves to Arizona. The twist in the tale—finely sustained

AT THE BALLET

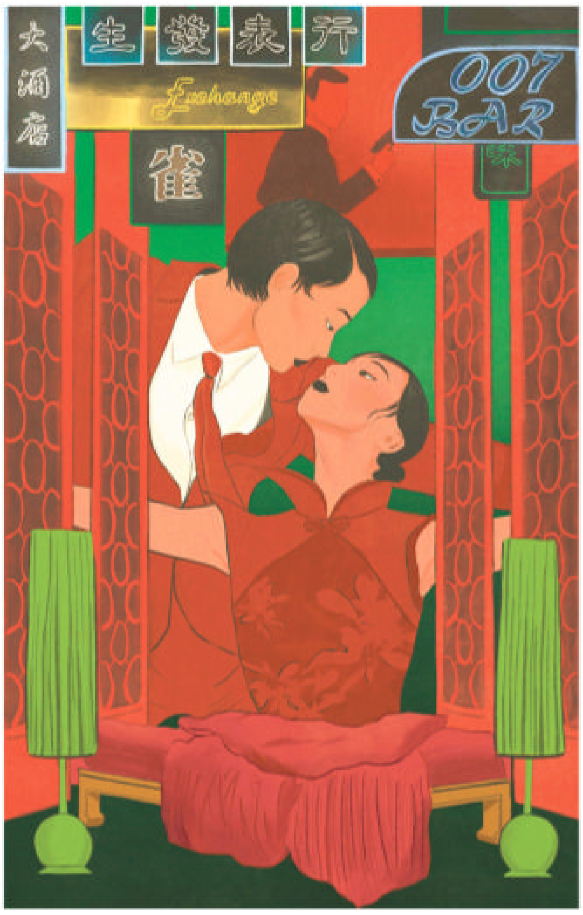


ILLUSTRATION BY LEA WOO

What story has been the subject of more makeovers than Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet”? In the version that **Hong Kong Ballet** brings to New York City Center, Jan. 13-14, the action has been moved to nineteen-sixties Hong Kong, a stylish setting that brings to mind Wong Kar Wai’s gorgeous 2000 film, “In the Mood for Love.” The women wear lithe cheongsam dresses, adapted for dancing, and the second act opens in a mah-jongg parlor. The fierce battles between the upper class and the lower class (replacing the Capulets and the Montagues) are fought kung-fu style. The choreographer, Septime Webre, formerly the artistic director of the Washington Ballet, and since 2017 the head of Hong Kong Ballet, makes it all work, with the help of splendid designs and a troupe of excellent dancers from Hong Kong and beyond.—*Marina Harss* by Spielberg and Tony Kushner, who co-wrote the screenplay—is that Sammy feels compelled, with a camera in hand, not only to step outside that close domestic embrace, and to forge new stories of his own, but also to scrutinize the world from which he comes. There is real pain in that scrutiny, and, as so often with Spielberg, it's hard not to yield to the emotional current with which he carries you along. The fable man does it again.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/21/22.) (In theatrical release and on video on demand.)*

Identification Marks: None

The vital insolence of youth—the defiance of authority, the sexual voracity, the craving for independence, the fabulistic testing of social masks, the vehement flailing in the face of confusion—finds pugnacious, wildly imaginative expression in the Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's first feature, from 1965. He stars as Andrzej, a Lódz university dropout and draft dodger who responds to a military panel with cool contempt and is sentenced to report for duty that very day. His last wanderings as a civilian, filmed almost in real time, involve carouses with opportunistic frenemies, coarse struggles with his girlfriend, a seraphic pickup at his former school, and raw couplings in the margin of the workday. Skolimowski films the free-spirited and desperate action with a bold and sardonic visual imagination; he captures the roiling life of the city with an outsider's sense of longing and abandon, mixing puckish long takes with jangled refractions of inner disorder and barely repressed frenzy. Few movies convey so well the rising artist's innocent guile and passionate bravado—and the stifled soulfulness of a quietly oppressed and oppressive society.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on MUBI.)*

A Man Called Otto

The lively cast of this sentimental comedic drama, a Pennsylvania-set remake of the 2015 Swedish film "A Man Called Ove" (based on the novel by Fredrik Backman), can't rescue it from facile plotting and formulaic emotions. Tom Hanks plays the title character, a bitter and fussy sixtysomething widower and an involuntarily retired engineer, who meticulously prepares to end his life by suicide. During each effort, however, Otto is interrupted by neighbors, both new ones (played by Mariana Treviño and Manuel Garcia-Rulfo) and longtime ones (played by Juanita Jennings, Peter Lawson Jones, and Cameron Britton), and he finds himself reluctantly drawn back into the fabric of life. The present-day action is interspersed with flashbacks of Otto recalling his encounter, as a young adult (Truman Hanks, the star's son), with a literary woman named Sonya (Rachel Keller), whom he married, and the joys and sorrows of their life together. Tapping into his long-stifled energy and purpose, Otto heals old grudges, takes up abandoned causes, and becomes a local hero. The movie, directed by Marc Forster, merely checks off a list of heartwarming virtues while turning its characters into ciphers.—*R.B. (In theatrical release.)*

Support the Girls

In this exuberant yet keenly observed comedy-drama, from 2018, the writer and director Andrew Bujalski goes behind the scenes of a Texas sports bar—where young waitresses in crop tops and hot pants serve up good clean flirtation to a largely male clientele—and unfolds the relationships, laws, and mores on which it runs. The result is a thrilling whirl of vital and spirited performances. Regina Hall commands the screen as Lisa, the bar's compassionate and all-seeing manager, who bends the rules and defies her boss (James Le Gros) to help several employees with legal problems while competing with a glitzier pub nearby. Despite her own romantic troubles, Lisa is mainly devoted to the bar's waitresses, especially the discerning and sarcastic Danyelle (Shayna McHayle) and the energetic, imaginative Maci (Haley Lu Richardson)—and is quietly anguished by the torrent of details on which the whole enterprise, and each woman's life, depends. Bujalski builds the insightful analysis of management and entertainment on a volcano of passion.—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi, HBO Max, and other services.)*

Vanity Fair

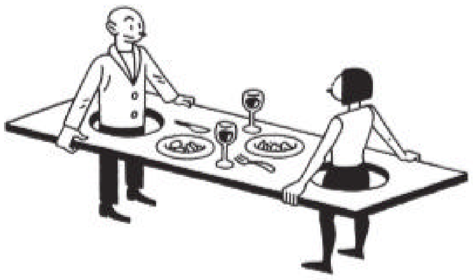
In the hands of the director Mira Nair, Thackeray's story of social climbing and tumbling emerges as strong meat, sauced to the point of surfeit by the heat of human greed. Becky Sharp (Reese Witherspoon) hasn't got a penny to her name, or a saving speck of conscience, but she has everything else, and, thus equipped, she begins her climb: a spell in the bosom of the Sedley family, courtesy of her friend Amelia (Romola Garai); a grim sojourn in the moldering mansion of the Crawleys; marriage to the dashing Rawdon (James Purefoy), the romance of which soon falters for lack of funds; and, by way of a Faustian finale, the demonic embrace of Lord Steyne (Gabriel Byrne), for whom money has bought a living death. Nair packs the frame with detail, and she never misses a chance to remind us just how much of the wealth of the early nineteenth century was garnered abroad, at the cost of colonial blood and sweat. With Jim Broadbent, Bob Hoskins, Eileen Atkins, Geraldine McEwan, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers. Released in 2004.—*A.L. (9/6/04) (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY CRITERION COLLECTION

It's a shock to hear Cary Grant say "ain't" in the snappy 1936 comedy **"Big Brown Eyes"** (now streaming on the Criterion Channel), but it comes with the turf that he covers as Danny Barr, a New York police detective who's pursuing a gang of jewel thieves. The action is centered on a Manhattan hotel's bustling and brassy barbershop that's frequented by the underworld and the law alike, and where Danny's girlfriend, Eve Fallon (Joan Bennett), works as a manicurist, sasses the customers, swaps gossip, and talks her way into a job as a cub reporter. When one of the thieves commits a murder, Eve and Danny—frustrated by the seeming impunity of mobsters—join forces to entrap him, in ways that would never pass muster with libel law or the Constitution but which generate a whirlwind of clever complications. The director, Raoul Walsh, fills the movie with cocksure grifters and workaday wiseacres who dish out sharp-edged patter—none more than Grant and Bennett, whose gibing often resembles quasi-Beckettian doubletalk. Here, Grant offers early flashes of the brash, suave, and intricate antics on which his enduring comedic persona is based.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Tatiana

10 Lincoln Center Plaza

There are two ways to enter the new restaurant Tatiana, in the new David Geffen Hall, at Lincoln Center: directly from the plaza or by way of the hall's lobby. On my second visit, I chose the latter, wending my way through a library-like array of tables and couches, where New Yorkers of all stripes sat quietly watching a live broadcast of the Philharmonic, onstage in the auditorium just yards away. This charming but sober tableau put an especially fine point on the party atmosphere on the other side of the glass doors, in Tatiana's dining room, where Usher was blasting and blue light cast a surreal glow on pink velvet chairs and marble tables set with gold cutlery.

If this scene within a fairly staid and hallowed institution sounds surprising, that's the point. In recent years, Lincoln Center has done its best to evolve. Tatiana, from the young chef Kwame Onwuachi, is a triumph in staying relevant while fitting into the broad category of performing arts: all restaurants are theatrical, of course, but eating here is like watching Onwuachi deliver a controlled and electric autobiographical monologue. As he does in his 2019 memoir, "Notes from a Young Black Chef," the menu traces a childhood spent in the Bronx and in Nigeria and a career that began in the galley of an oil-spill-response vessel off the coast of Louisiana (his mother's home state) before leading him to the Culinary Institute of America and then to Per Se, Eleven Madison Park, and the TV show "Top Chef." (He didn't win, but was a fan favorite.)

When Onwuachi quit his job at E.M.P., the chef de cuisine urged him to "think of your ancestors"—Carême and Escoffier, David Chang and Thomas Keller. But those weren't his ancestors, Onwuachi writes. His ancestors "ground cassava flour . . . soaked stockfish, and hit kola trees until the nuts fell down." They were "steeped in the curries and jerk of Jamaica" and the "gumbos and jambalayas of Louisiana." At Tatiana, which is named for Onwuachi's older sister, he manages to pay tribute to all of his forebears, giants of fine dining included.

The menu is divided into small and large "share" plates, a word I found to be misleading at times. Dumplings filled with *egusi* soup, a touchstone of Nigerian cooking, made with ground melon seeds, came in portions of three; jerk-spiced scallops arrived on a pair of tiny skewers; and an order of Mom Dukes Shrimp consisted of just two—albeit very large and very delicious, head-on and drenched in creole butter. Much easier to split were a bowl of okra—deep-fried until deflated but crisp, absorbent of honey, mustard, and a habanero "peppa sauce"—and a play on the Jamaican dish escovitch, here featuring medallions of sweet raw hamachi fanned with avocado slices on a pool of carrot *à la nage* (poached in court bouillon and reduced).

From almost anyone else, a gussied-up chopped cheese, a beloved-in-the-Bronx bodega sandwich made with ground beef and Cheez Whiz or melted American, would strike me as misguided. Onwuachi's interpretation, featuring aged rib eye and Taleggio on brioche, crowned with shredded romaine and shaved truffle, fits winningly into his story. An even more successful homage to his New York youth is the POG Nutcracker (passionfruit, orange, and guava juices and rum), inspired by his stint peddling the homemade, plastic-bottled fruit-juice cocktails sold (illegally) on the city's street corners and beaches.

The most obvious showpiece is the short-rib pastrami *suya*, a single, hefty blackened rib, seasoned at the intersection of Jewish deli and northern-Nigerian barbecue, accompanied by caraway-coconut Parker House rolls. I preferred an abundant bowl of braised oxtails, as large and beefy as I've ever seen, served with Thumbelina carrots, chayote squash, and rice and peas. It was homey and comforting but elegant and distinctive, too, the sticky, glossy morsels of meat, fat, and cartilage scraping cleanly off the bone and cutting right to the heart of Onwuachi's power. *(Dishes $12-$70.)*

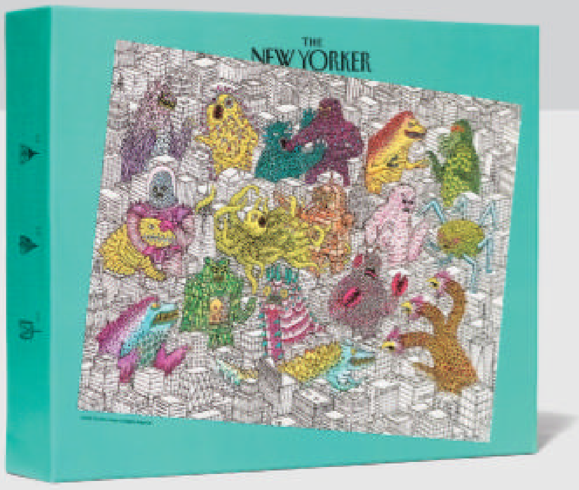
—*Hannah Goldfield*

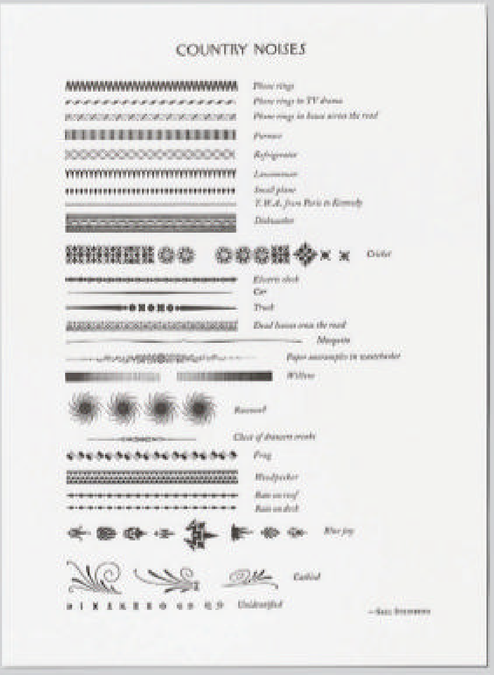
PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACHARY ZAVISLAK FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

Richard McGuire's Full-Tilt Clock

THE NEW YORKER STORE

Edward Steed's "There Goes the Neighborhood" Puzzle





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THE NEW YORKER

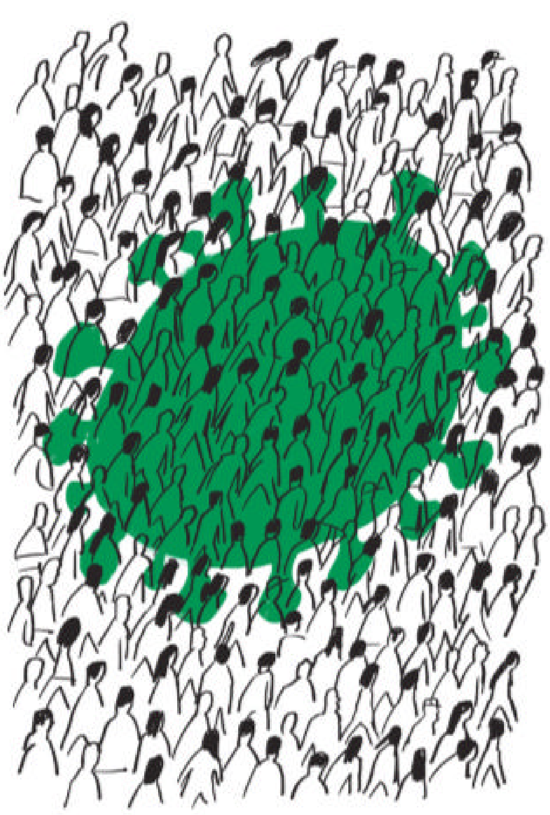
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
VIRAL NUMBERS

In "How to Lie with Statistics," a best-selling book from 1954, the journalist (and tobacco apologist) Darrell Huff details common techniques for manipulating people's understanding of reality, among them truncating the y-axis of a graph. A trend line starts in a chart's midsection and moseys up and to the right—a gradual rise over time. But if you hack off empty space at the bottom and zoom in on the action, the line takes off like a rocket. The axis transforms the narrative.

Throughout the pandemic, we have truncated not the y-axis but the x-axis: stopping time to pass judgment on a nation's performance instead of waiting to consider the broad sweep of the COVID-19 years. Cut the graph at the summer of 2020 and the United States is a catastrophic outlier, a beacon of pandemic mismanagement. Let it roll a few more months and European countries botch their reopening, unleashing a wave of deaths. Press play again and India is engulfed in a viral inferno that threatens not only its own citizens but, because it stopped exporting vaccines for half a year, millions of lives around the world. Last month, China, after suppressing the virus for three years through its often draconian "zero COVID" policy—recording just five thousand COVID deaths in a population of 1.4 billion—abruptly abandoned that approach and is now consumed by an enormous viral surge. The country that was home to the first coronavirus outbreak may now experience its worst. The axis transforms the narrative.

In the past month in China, hospitals, pharmacies, and funeral homes have been overwhelmed, but the scale of the misery is anyone's guess. The country no longer tallies asymptomatic infections or reliably reports COVID deaths—employing not the distortion of statistics but their omission. According to minutes from a meeting of the National Health Commission, however, a quarter of a billion people are thought to have contracted the virus in the first three weeks of December; an estimated thirty-seven million were infected on a single day. Experts expect the initial surge to peak in the cities later this month, but a second, possibly more punishing wave could tear through rural areas in February or March, after millions of people trek home for the Lunar New Year. Projections of the eventual fallout vary, but some models anticipate that one to two million people will die of COVID in the coming months.



An outbreak that touches a sixth of humanity creates countless opportunities for the virus to mutate into more transmissible forms, and to drive repeat infections and fresh surges around the world. In the United States, a new Omicron subvariant, XBB.1.5, is thought to be the most contagious yet—already accounting for three-quarters of new cases in the Northeast—and COVID hospitalizations are on the rise. It's possible that China's viral tsunami will generate new Omicron descendants, or, worse, entirely new variants of concern.

The crisis raises fundamental questions about why China persisted with "zero COVID" for so long and why it chose to reverse its policy now. The spread of the hyper-contagious Omicron variant last year forced other countries to accept that the societal costs of purging the virus had grown unsustainable. China pressed on, but deepening economic concerns and social unrest forced President Xi Jinping's hand. In 2022, the economy grew at the slowest rate in three decades (aside from the pandemic-inflicted slowdown of 2020), and in November the country saw its most widespread protests since Tiananmen Square, triggered by a deadly apartment-building fire and a series of traumatizing lockdowns that limited access to food and medical care, not to mention meaningful human connection.

A more perplexing question is why China failed to prepare for the inevitable. Owing to a confluence of factors, the country found itself in a uniquely perilous position as it looked to reopen. The success of "zero COVID" meant that the population had little exposure to the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

virus and, consequently, little natural immunity. China, which is one of the fastest-aging countries on earth, has more than two hundred and fifty million people over the age of sixty—the group most at risk of serious illness and death after contracting the virus. Meanwhile, vulnerable populations are dangerously undervaccinated: by mid-December, only forty-two per cent of people over the age of eighty had received two shots and a booster. Those who are immunized have received domestically developed vaccines, which are less effective than the mRNA vaccines, and have not been updated to target Omicron subvariants. (China has refused to authorize Western vaccines, although it recently allowed the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to be given to German expatriates.) These challenges are compounded by a fragile health-care system, which has long struggled to meet the needs of China's immense population and is now further weakened by medical workers falling ill. The demand for I.C.U. care could soon exceed the country's capacity many times over.

A less deadly transition was possible. The government could have authorized mRNA vaccines and mounted an aggressive immunization campaign focussed on the elderly. It could have procured and distributed much larger quantities of antiviral and anti-fever drugs. It could have bolstered its health system's capacity and communicated forthrightly about how and where to access resources. Instead, the ruling Communist Party, which prizes control, has been conspicuously quiet. (Failing to prepare is, of course, not unique to China: the U.S. has repeatedly failed to fund needed investments in pandemic readiness, and the government no longer covers the cost of vaccinations or antiviral medications. Meanwhile, few Americans have availed themselves of Omicron-specific boosters.) Xi waited for weeks to address the nation, presumably to distance himself from the turmoil. When he finally spoke, he told the public to "develop good personal-hygiene habits," and in an address on December 31st—as factories shuttered, hospitals reeled, and crematoriums filled—he said that the Party had "put life first all along."

China's emergency serves as a lesson that, in an interconnected world, isolation can buy time, but it can't eliminate threats. New COVID-testing requirements imposed by the U.S. and other countries on travellers from China are unlikely to accomplish much beyond scoring a few political points and providing a false sense of security. In the meantime, the virus threatens the health and the well-being of hundreds of millions of people, many of whom lack the basic protections that we now take for granted. Beijing has at its disposal many tools to shape the narrative, statistical and otherwise, but it can't change that reality.

—*Dhruv Khullar*

WIND ON CAPITOL HILL
CAMERAWORK

Pathetic? Enraging? Ludicrous? Honestly pretty funny, but in a patience-testing, Andy Kaufman sort of way? For most Americans, last week's marathon voting sessions to elect (or not) a Speaker of the House were all of those things. But, for connoisseurs of C-SPAN, serial failure made for riveting television, at least by that network's normal production standards, which veer more toward vintage Soviet broadcasts than toward "Real Housewives" or the N.F.L. on Fox. The usual approach features locked-down cameras focussed tightly on individual speechmakers, a rigid mise en scène only occasionally enlivened by a wide-angle shot of the House floor, as if cutting to security-camera footage. But as the G.O.P. butted heads with its own rump faction, humiliating the Party's nominal head Kevin McCarthy through round after round of losses, C-SPAN's cameras, freed from their normal strictures for reasons we'll get to in a moment, were panning and zooming and cutting back and forth with an almost cinematic brio.

There were vivid tableaux, especially on the first day, as the House floor churned with energy and the aisles filled with knots of gesticulating legislators; viewers—especially if they were cinéastes with generous imaginations—may have been reminded of the roiling, Old Master-inspired crowd scenes in "Raging Bull." At times, the network ignored the main "action" altogether to focus on ancillary dramas, like the polite but animated parleys between the Democratic "squad" member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the MAGA-ists Paul Gosar and Matt Gaetz, which made news during the first day of voting. Turning up again and again, like a scene-stealing supporting player, was the representative-elect George Santos, the Queens-Long Island fabulist. Here he hovered expectantly near a scrum of rebel Republicans, who were doing their best to ignore him; there he sat next to the McCarthy loyalist Marjorie Taylor-Green, who seemed intent on making eye contact with anyone else. A pariah, but the camera adored him.

"I love the shots on the new 'looser' C-SPAN. It's kind of like C-SPAN after hours," said David Mandel, the TV showrunner and director ("Veep"; the forthcoming HBO Max Watergate comedy, "White House Plumbers"). "I love seeing the side chats, the attempts at dealmaking, and, most importantly, I love watching the Democrats try to pretend they aren't enjoying every second of it." He added one caveat: "Sadly, there is no sound. We need everyone miked like an N.F.L. game." Nevertheless, viewers were rewarded with all manner of minor-key vérité drama, as when the camera caught a male representative telling a joke to a female representative, who responded with what looked like a charity laugh, then got up and left. On subsequent days, as the mood became enervated, the mix of stasis and routine was its own drama. A stifled yawn . . . a stifled laugh . . . the drudgery of standing up once again to vote for Byron Donalds. This was C-SPAN doing "Jeanne Dielman."

Or was this C-SPAN doing "Twilight"? Supernatural teen melodrama was what the director Judd Apatow saw in shots of huddled G.O.P. rebels relishing the attention. He said that he was reminded of "the scenes where the evil vampires, the Volturi coven, gather to conspire. Every smile gives me the willies. They are clearly planning their attack on the Cullen family."

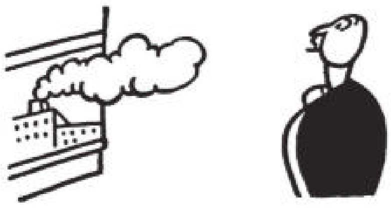
The Cable-Satellite Public Affairs

Network launched in 1979, aiming for neither art house nor multiplex. Rather, it began just the way you'd imagine: with a platitudinous speech on the floor of the House from the then representative Al Gore, Jr. The network was allowed to cover day-to-day business in the House and the Senate on the condition that the leadership of each institution control the cameras and the feeds. If you are a senator or a representative who doesn't want to be spotted doing Wordle instead of the people's business, you probably like this arrangement, although it's not foolproof. The former senator Al Franken recalled a couple of instances when he was caught on C-SPAN performing "physical humor" that arguably "didn't look terribly senatorial. I think once it was like a little dance, like I was showing Marco Rubio a move." But here's the loophole: on certain occasions, such as when Congress is in joint session for the State of the Union address or for a speech from a foreign dignitary like Volodymyr Zelensky, C-SPAN is permitted to call its own shots. This is also the case for the opening of a new Congress, when the Speaker is chosen. These elections are usually pro forma; this year, you might say that the network has found itself in the happy position of a wedding videographer at a ceremony that has gone horribly but amusingly awry.

Have C-SPAN's people been enjoying the gift? "Oh, absolutely," Benjamin O'Connell, the network's director of editorial operations, said. "I don't think it's been lost on anyone here that we are participating in a historic event by showing something so unusual to the American people." O'Connell acknowledged that many people think C-SPAN is "boring," but insisted that he and his colleagues take their craft and their mission as seriously as anyone at Hulu or Film Forum. "It's all about visual storytelling," he said. His personal taste in movies runs toward indie filmmakers like Kelly Reichardt and Jim Jarmusch. Has any of their DNA made it into C-SPAN? The question made him laugh. "I don't know if I can claim it with a straight face," he admitted, "but I would like to think so."

—*Bruce Handy*

BRAVE NEW WORLD
ONLY SUSTAIN



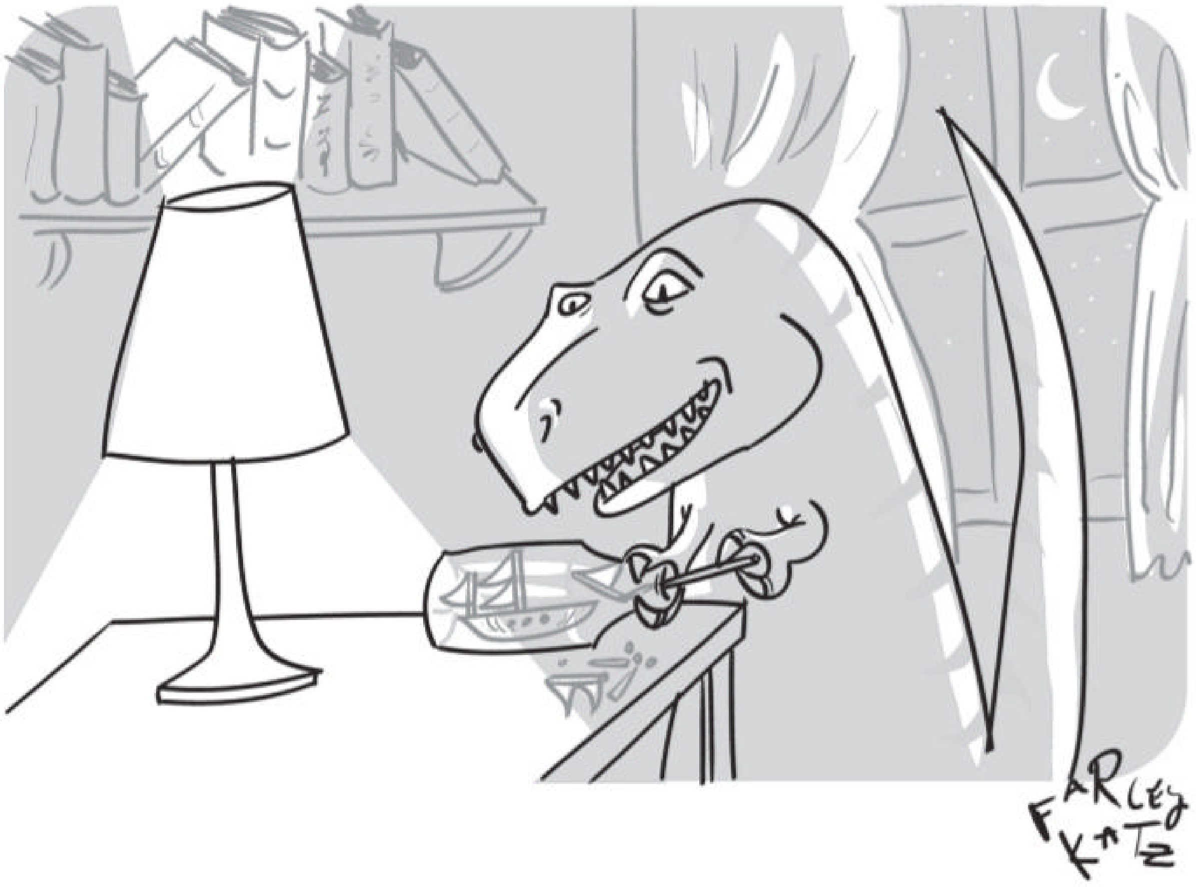
Kudos to you! You've decided to do your part in saving the planet by going off the grid. Not keen on relocating to Maine or Montana? Manhattan works just fine. Josh Spodek went off the grid in May in his studio apartment in the West Village. He just disconnected the circuit breaker, and now his carbon footprint is about that of three average-sized house cats. Good news! Spodek has invited you over to show you the ropes. He's the lean guy with the spiky brown hair and brown hiking shirt. Hungry? There's some leftovers from yesterday's solar-powered no-packaging vegan stew, which has been sitting out overnight, and which Spodek has sniffed, declaring, "I don't think you'll die."

Introductions are in order. Spodek is a fifty-one-year-old executive-leadership coach and environmentalist. He specializes in winning converts—C.E.O.s, oil executives, Trumpers—to sustainable life styles. Check out his blog and his podcast, where he conducts interviews and enumerates personal facts, including number of burpees performed since 2011 (two hundred and three thousand five hundred and seventy-eight) and times mugged (many).

What does it mean to live off the grid in a city? No wall outlets, no gas hookup, no taxis. Elevators are out. Running water is in, though Spodek is stingy with the faucet. You'll need some essentials, including a handheld battery, a portable solar charger, and roof access; in the winter, it only takes six or so hours of direct sunlight to power your days.

First lesson: off-grid cooking. Your fridge is no more, so Spodek keeps it simple. Every day is solar-powered-no-packaging-vegan-stew day—legumes, nuts, veggies in a pressure cooker. (Unless it rains, in which case: salad.) "Also, it turns out banana peels are edible," Spodek says. Today he's making seitan from scratch. Don't mind that chunk that fell on the floor. Waste isn't an option. "It's going in," he says. Obviously, fermenting is a must. So is composting, which accounts for the gnats buzzing around. "I keep vegan, but I do kill flies," Spodek says. You might be wondering: is all the fridge-disconnecting and fermenting and composting going to make your apartment stink? Only mildly.

While you're waiting for the stew to cook, perhaps you're pondering whether you *should* just move to Montana. Advantages include no co-op boards—Spodek's rejected building-wide compost bins in the basement. Permanent solar



"*Now* whose arms are tiny and useless!"

panels aren't happening either, so Spodek hikes up and down eleven flights for each charge. (The burpees help.) Still, Spodek's not leaving: "People, forever, have moved to live off in nature. They get this lovely little place. And then someone else moves there and someone else moves there and then, boom! There's a new city." Urban ecosystems offer their own bounty. Spodek forages in parks for berries, though he once thought he was eating wild blueberries when he was actually eating toxic black nightshade.

Next lesson: dating! Lucky for you, Spodek has dabbled as a dating coach (résumé: "Women said 'I love you' fairly often to me, often saying it first"). He now prefers off-the-grid relationships. "There's more intimacy," he says. "You're doing stuff together. This is a much more active life style." You'll have to overcome some natural encumbrances. Spodek has observed that animals are attracted to energy wasters: "I've never seen an unattractive woman getting out of a Ferrari."

Stew's ready! Spodek has arranged a flight of his apple kombuchas and beet and orange chutneys (peels included), which are pleasantly zingy. For dessert, how about some slightly past-their-prime blackberries? Everything will taste not so bad and cause only moderate digestive complications.

Now you're fuelled up for remote work. Spodek has coaching clients to attend to. For hedge funds and corporations, he charges fifteen thousand dollars for six months of executive training. "For other people, I say pay what you can," he says. He has calls back to back today to discuss sustainability: a former ExxonMobil manager, a German oil executive, then Alan Iny, a partner at Boston Consulting Group. Iny reports that he's reconsidering the wisdom of constant business travel. "Progress can be slow in the non-Josh world," he concedes. Make sure to monitor your phone battery. "It's at seven per cent," Spodek says. "I think I'll be O.K."

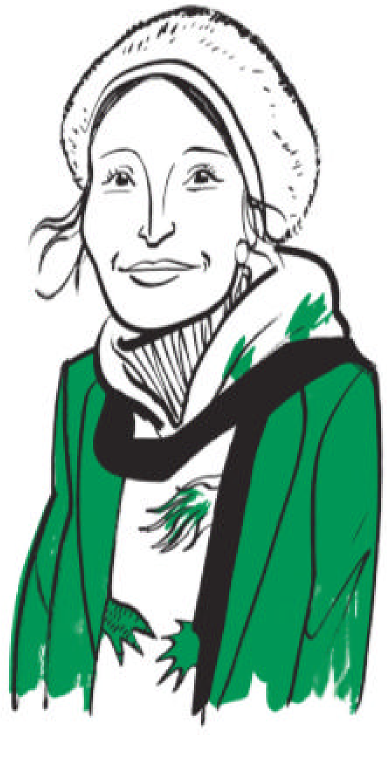
Up to the roof for more charging. It's a good spot to reflect on your new life's rewards. "I know the patterns of the shadows," Spodek says. "Due south is right in the middle, between the World Trade Center and the Woolworth Building." He likes to orient the panels in that direction for more light. "The weather and the sun drive a lot of my decisions," Spodek says. "Rain means I have to cut way back on computer use. It's being humble to nature."

Another bonus is that your endeavor may bring you into contact with interesting people. Because he won't take a plane, Spodek has learned how to sail. "This was pre-Greta," he says. "A friend of mine knew Boris, the guy who sailed her over. When she arrived, I brought some citrus fruit." Spodek was thinking scurvy. Boris, he recalls, took an orange. Greta reached for some pineapple chunks, then reconsidered. "So that's my conversation with Greta. 'Would you like some pineapple?' 'No, thank you.' "

—*Zach Helfand*

THE PICTURES
CUT IN HALF

"Someone told me there's a painting here that looks just like me," the actor Vicky Krieps said not long ago, as she climbed the marble stairs of the Neue Galerie, on Fifth Avenue. She wore cowboy boots, a pink Lacoste sweatshirt, a green velvet blazer, and a fuzzy white beret that had belonged to her grandmother; two feathers hung, dream-catcher style, from one ear. Upstairs, she considered the Klimts. "Definitely not that one," she said, pointing to "The Woman in Gold." She gestured toward a small half profile of a woman dressed in black. "Perhaps I look a little like her, in the movie," she said, glancing doubtfully at her sweatshirt.



Vicky Krieps

In Krieps's new film, "Corsage," she plays the Empress Elisabeth, who, with her husband, Franz Joseph, ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late nineteenth century. In "Corsage," which was directed by Marie Kreutzer, Elisabeth (or Sissi) is by turns willful and melancholic, a reflexive rebel who kicks at the ankles of the Hapsburg hierarchy but is obsessed with her place in it. "Sissi was a little in touch with something ahead of her time," Krieps said. "She was very vain, she was very strict. In a certain sense, she was very ignorant—but you see signs of something else."

As in "Phantom Thread," in which Krieps played the muse-antagonist to Daniel Day-Lewis's couturier, viewers of "Corsage" spend a lot of time looking at Krieps's waistline. The Empress was famous for her wasp waist, rumored to be as slim as sixteen inches, which she maintained with orange-slice dinners and leather corsets. (Those puzzled by the film's name can consult Merriam-Webster: cor-sage, n 1. the waist or bodice of a dress.) At Kreutzer's urging, costume designers avoided the fuss and flounce of the eighteen-seventies in favor of sleeker styles, but the corsets stayed.

"Corsage," which grew from an idea that Krieps pitched to Kreutzer, was filmed mostly in Vienna; on some days, Krieps wore a corset for fourteen hours. "It's torture," she said. "It cuts you in half." Sometimes the woman strapping her in ended up with blood on her hands. ("Tighter," Sissi growls at her maid.) "No man would ever wear one for even five minutes," Krieps said.

In retrospect, Krieps thinks that spending so much time in a corset was a mistake. "You can't cry, you can't really get angry," Krieps said. "Yes, that's now in the film—but the film is also about her rebelling, having the breath of air you want her to have."

In the next room, she admired a series of Schiele drawings. Elisabeth, she said, would have liked them, but might not have known why: "She's a huge contradiction." In the film, Sissi visits a mental institution where doctors tie women to their beds; disturbed, and moved, she hands out boxes of candied violets. "She's not at all helping," Krieps said. "She's out of vocabulary to think, What's wrong about this?"

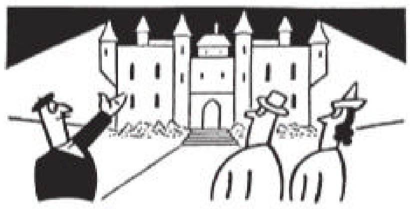
Krieps grew up in Luxembourg (her grandfather was a prominent member of the Resistance, and her father helped run the Film Fund), but she's lived in Berlin for more than a decade. "I love it, then I hate it, then I love it," she said of the city. In the museum's oak-panelled Viennese café, she ordered a hot chocolate, *mit Schlag*, and a slice of Linzer torte. "It's very good," she said. "I would put a little less sugar in the jam, which is very German to say."

On her wrist, a faded stamp from House of Yes, a Bushwick night club that she'd visited the previous evening, read "Dance Your Heart Out." "I was a little disappointed—I'm spoilt from Berlin," she said. "There was a kind of aggressive energy." She had gone with her friend Debbie Attias, an artist and musician who created Dancorcism, which the *Times* has called "a dance party to heal the soul." Krieps is a certified Dancorcist. "I found it online during the lockdown," she said. "I was, like, *gasp*, someone invented something just for me."

Upstairs, Krieps had seen a picture called "The Dancer," in which drifts of flowers cover most of a figure, except for her breasts. A doppelgänger? "Flowers and half naked," she said. "That's me."

—*Fergus McIntosh*

COTSWOLDS POSTCARD
WAUGH SLEPT HERE

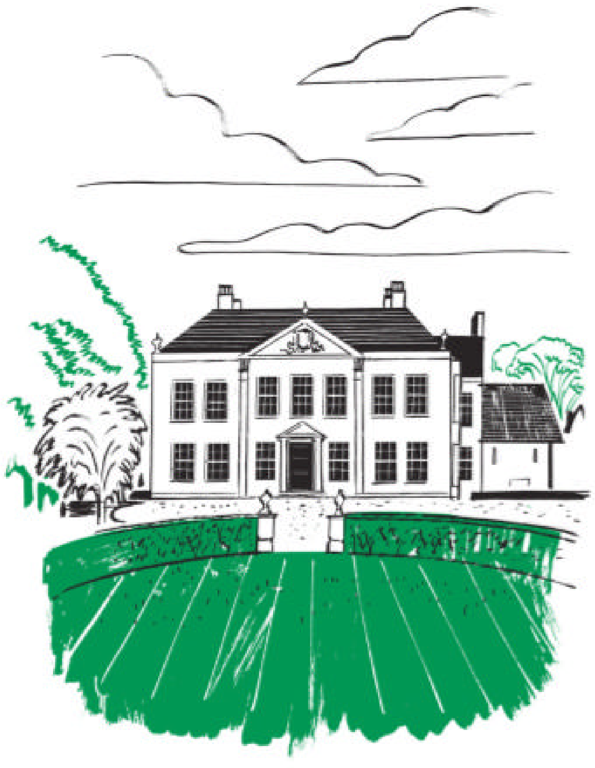


In 1937, the novelist Evelyn Waugh moved into Piers Court, a Georgian manor house near the town of Dursley, in the Cotswolds countryside. The house, a wedding gift from Waugh's in-laws, sits on twenty-four acres and has eight bedrooms, six sitting rooms, a wine cellar, and a croquet lawn. Waugh wasn't a fan. "I live in a shabby stone house in the country, where nothing is under a hundred years old except the plumbing and that does not work," he told *Life* magazine. His opinion subsequently soured further. In a letter to his estate agent, in 1955, Waugh wrote, "If you happen to meet a lunatic who wants to live in this ghastly area, please tell him." Waugh moved out a year later. Sixty-three years after that, Helen Lawton, a self-described Waugh superfan, and her partner, Bechara Madi—known in the British tabloids as "the tenants from hell"—moved in.

Lawton and Madi, who run a small business offering "niche financing solutions" to "participants in the marine sector," had coveted the house for years, but, lacking munificent in-laws, couldn't afford its three-million-pound price tag. Undeterred, they persuaded their friend Jason Blain, an allegedly wealthy former executive at the BBC, to help them finance the purchase. Blain bought the place and set his friends' rent at two hundred and fifty pounds a year. He turned out to be a less reliable financial partner than anticipated. A year ago, he was sued by the Mandarin Oriental hotel in London for allegedly skipping out on the bill after an eight-month stay. He also defaulted on the Piers Court mortgage.

The bank put the house up for auction last month. Madi and Lawton dug in. They refused to leave, nor would they allow any viewings or provide any photos of the house. (Resourceful estate agents wrote the listing in the past tense—"on the west side of the library was a large bay window.") The *Daily Mail* dispatched a photographer, who snapped shots of Madi walking his dog, Boo. The Evelyn Waugh Society, which operates a blog, evinced skepticism of Lawton's Waugh fandom, based on an account from a member who visited the house in 2019 and reported that Lawton hadn't known that it had belonged to the novelist.

Among residents of Dursley—J. K. Rowling named Harry Potter's odious adoptive family after the town—impressions of the tenants are mixed. "They are going through an absolute poo-fest," a local shopkeeper said. "They are absolutely lovely people. Helen is great for a good chat." A waitress said that Lawton had asked her to work as staff at one of her parties: "She told me she's a real party animal." She added, "They hang around with, like, rich people, not the likes of me."



Piers Court

What of the tenants? Had they pulled a Harry and Meghan and left town? Or were they still defiantly partying? The gates to Piers Court, which are in mild decay, were open on a recent day. A long driveway led to a house of almost comic grandeur. Madi answered the door dressed all in gray. Lawton remained upstairs. Boo was nowhere to be seen. "We are extremely private people and do not like the media attention," Madi said. "We are caught up in our friend's problems. And it is a real bummer. The news makes it out like we only pay two hundred and fifty pounds per year. But the garden alone costs a hundred thousand pounds a year to maintain, which, believe me, we are paying!" He went on to complain about the plumbing.

Piers Courts is where Waugh lived when he wrote "Brideshead Revisited," a novel about nostalgia for the golden age of the English aristocracy. Madi said he hadn't read it: "I am not a literary person."

The house technically already had new owners—an anonymous bidder had paid 3.1 million pounds. Madi vowed to stay. "Although theoretically the house has been auctioned, we think it is reversible," he said. "If the sale goes through, the new owners will get an order to evict us." He gave a thumbs-up and smiled: "We're fighters!"

—*Parker Henry*

LETTER FROM ITALY

THE MISSING

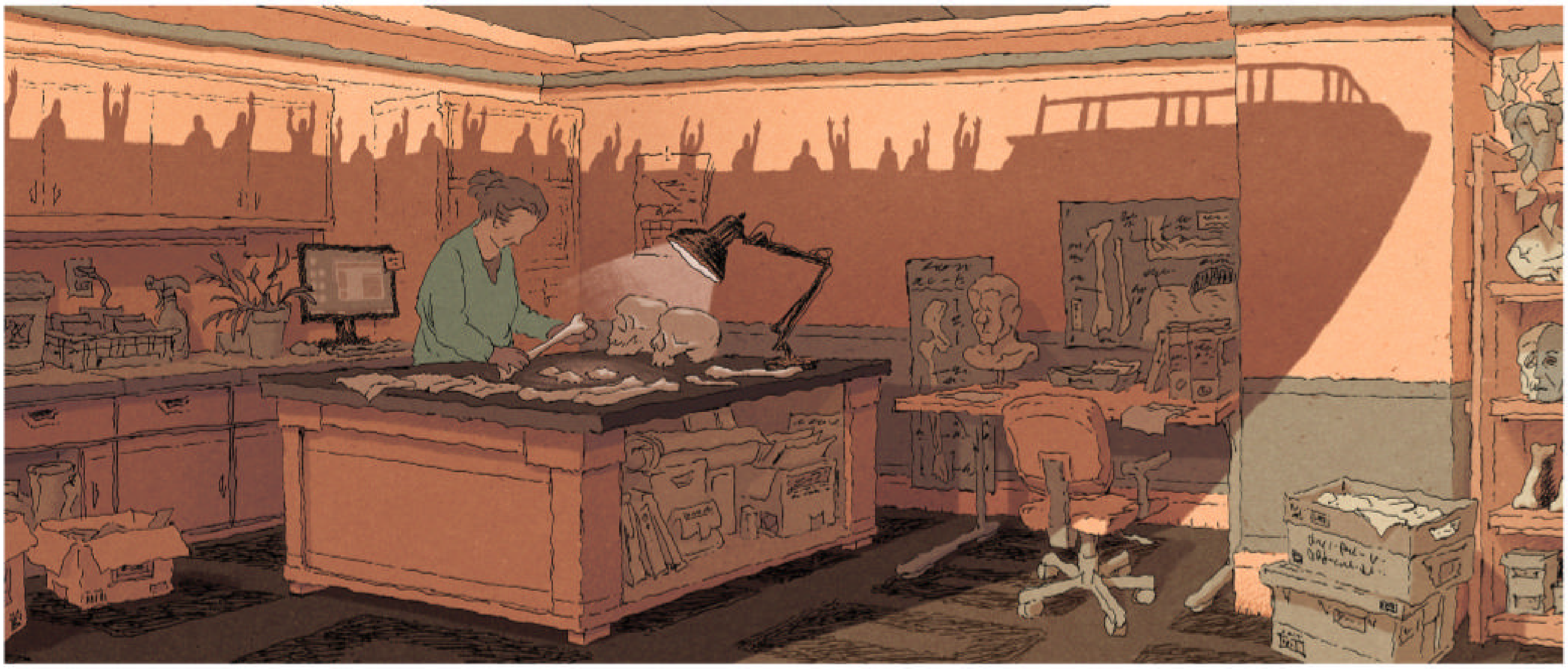
Many migrants disappear on their way to Europe. Most are never identified.

BY ALEXIS OKEOWO

By the time Nasenet Alme Wildmikael arrived in Germany, in 2015, she had passed through four countries by land or sea and had spent a month in a migrant prison. Wildmikael was twenty-three and petite, with full cheeks and a puff of curly hair. She had grown up in a small town in western Eritrea, the fourth of ten children. Her father died when she was young, and her mother raised the kids alone, working as a laundress. Although they had little money, she refused to let her children work. Wildmikael's home life was happy. She loved cars and wanted to be a mechanic. But there was little opportunity for the necessary schooling, and her future was uncertain. "Even if you dreamed to have something more, you knew that you would never reach it," she told me recently.

When Wildmikael was sixteen, she fell in love with a neighbor, a boy named Biniam, and soon became pregnant. Their son, Yafet, was born in 2008. Biniam took part in the baptism and promised to marry Wildmikael, but he left for Sudan before Yafet turned one. This was her first heartbreak. Biniam didn't explain why he left, but Wildmikael believed that he wasn't ready to be a father and wanted to escape repression in Eritrea. President Isaias Afwerki, the country's longtime leader, has been accused of a variety of human-rights violations, including mass surveillance, arbitrary arrest, torture, and indefinite military conscription for Eritreans. To leave the country, Eritreans must have an exit visa, but the government rarely grants them. Many citizens feel trapped. Some five thousand people a month attempt, illegally and at great risk, to leave the country, according to the United Nations. (The Eritrean government has denied committing human-rights violations.) Wildmikael's brother, at sixteen, had to enter military service, where conscripts endure forced labor, low pay, and physical abuse; those caught trying to escape are imprisoned or killed. "I didn't want my son to be in the military," Wildmikael told me. When she was eighteen, she left Eritrea with Yafet, walking three days through the desert to reach Sudan.

In Khartoum, the capital, Wildmikael spent six years serving chai at a café. Biniam also lived in the city, but he was not involved in Yafet's life. Wildmikael and Biniam were both undocumented, a precarious status in Sudan: security services have abducted Eritreans living in Khartoum to send them back. By the spring of 2013, Biniam, at the age of twenty-six, had left Sudan. Later that year, Wildmikael found out that he had disappeared. He had been texting friends throughout his journey, but his messages stopped after he boarded a boat in Libya, bound for Italy. Soon afterward, on October 3rd, a rickety fishing boat crammed with migrants, many of them Eritrean, sank off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost island. The authorities found the remains of three hundred and sixty-six people in the wreckage. Photographs of the possible victims circulated among the tight-knit Eritrean community in Khartoum, and Wildmikael saw someone who looked like Biniam. She felt grief. "I was really hurt by him, but I loved him," she said. "I grew up without a father, and I didn't want my son to grow up without a father, too."



Cristina Cattaneo, a forensic scientist, said, "Knowing whether your son is dead or not is a fundamental right."

Two years later, Wildmikael decided to try making it to Europe, too. "I knew that it was difficult to go from Sudan to Libya, especially if you are a woman," she said. "I knew that people were dying in the sea to reach Europe. I knew everything. But I made the decision." She

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS KIM

wanted to earn money to send to her mother back home, and to give Yafet opportunities that she had been denied. "I really wanted to study and to have a job, a normal life," she told me. She decided to leave Yafet, who was six, with a family friend in Khartoum. This was her second heartbreak. But it was for his safety: she knew a woman who had drowned in the sea with her sons. If Wildmikael received asylum in Europe, she thought, Yafet could fly to join her.

She made her way through the Sahel desert, using a route where many migrants have died of hunger or thirst, and where sexual violence is so common that some women take contraceptives before embarking. In Libya, she was held in a detention center in Tripoli. The guards fed the prisoners once a day and frequently beat the male detainees. After a month, she was released, and paid almost two thousand dollars to board a boat to Italy. "When I was on the boat, I thought I would never reach the ground again," Wildmikael said. "But, *alhamdulillah*, I arrived." She continued on to Germany, and was eventually granted asylum and given a renewable two-year residency permit. She moved to Vacha, a serene town in the center of the country, where she enrolled in German classes and made friends with her neighbors, an elderly German couple who helped her navigate the grocery store. "I felt like I had freedom," she said.

But when she called the German Embassy in Khartoum to send for Yafet, she was told that he couldn't join her. German law stipulated that she needed his father's consent to bring him, or a death certificate proving that his father was dead. Migrants who don't survive the journey to Europe are rarely found or identified, though, and Wildmikael had no proof of Biniam's death. She hired a lawyer, who told her that, without official documentation, she had little recourse. When I met Wildmikael, last year, she had not seen Yafet, who is now fourteen, in almost eight years. They had interacted only through daily video calls. She sent three hundred euros a month to Sudan for his needs, including to pay for a private tutor, because he couldn't attend school as an undocumented migrant. "He's a really smart boy," she told me. "He studies every day, and he learns quickly." Yafet had recently asked if he could make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean himself, to join her.

Last year, through Eritrean diaspora networks, Wildmikael contacted a forensic anthropologist named Cristina Cattaneo, the head of the Anthropological and Odontological Lab (LABANOF), at the State University of Milan. Cattaneo has spent much of her career identifying the bodies of people who have gone missing in Italy. Since 2013, she has also used the tools of forensic science—antemortem photographs, dental superimpositions, body markings, personal belongings, DNA samples—to help identify the bodies of missing migrants. When Cattaneo first heard from Wildmikael, she was struck by how long Biniam had been missing, with no state effort to determine what had happened to him. "You feel that the system has failed enormously," she told me. "We have European relatives of victims of disasters who complain, rightly so, because they have to wait two or three weeks for a burn victim to be identified. It's even more outrageous that people have to wait ten years." Cattaneo hopes to give some dignity to the deceased, and a sense of closure to the living. She immediately took on the case. "It's about respecting the rights of humans to have their dead identified," she said.

In the past decade, the Mediterranean Sea and the shores of Italy, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece have become a vast graveyard. As a result of conflict, repression, economic circumstances, famine, and drought, more than two million people have tried to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since 2014, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. At least twenty-five thousand have disappeared in the crossing and are presumed dead. Most of these bodies remain at the bottom of the sea; some have washed ashore and been buried in unmarked graves—two thousand in Italy alone. The relatives of those who go missing are often left with only social-media posts from their loved ones and unfinished text conversations. "What about the families? There's nobody that provides an answer," José Pablo Baraybar, the forensic coördinator at the International Committee of the Red Cross, in Paris, said.

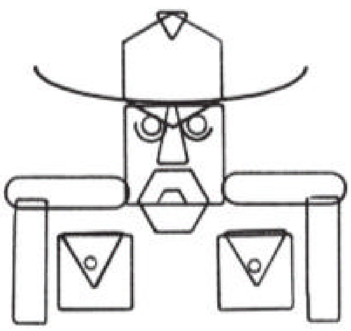
The International Commission on Missing Persons was started in 1996, by President Bill Clinton, after the conflict in the Balkans. Forty thousand people had gone missing. The I.C.M.P. helped countries arrange the excavation of mass graves and the extraction of DNA from human remains. Seventy per cent of the bodies were ultimately identified. In 2004, after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the organization helped affected countries extract DNA samples to build an extensive database of the missing, which led to the identification of tens of thousands of people. "Finding missing persons and investigating their disappearances is a state responsibility, regardless of whether the person is a citizen or noncitizen, regardless of their nationality, their ethnic background, their racial background," Kathryne Bomberger, the Commission's director-general, told me. "Clearly, there is a double standard."

The I.C.M.P. has pushed for a similar effort to locate and identify the bodies of deceased migrants today, and to investigate their disappearances. In 2017, a member of the Italian parliament proposed a motion that would fund migrant identification, but it never made it to a vote. The following year, Italy, Malta, Greece, and Cyprus agreed to share information on the DNA of migrant bodies with the Commission, but so far none of the countries have submitted the relevant data. Instead, the European Union has invested heavily in efforts to block migration, even at the risk of contributing to migrant deaths. In 2018, it equipped and trained the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants headed for Europe. Sometimes the Coast Guard sank boats in the process. Captured migrants have been taken to prisons in Libya, where they have been tortured, extorted, and sold into forced labor. The E.U. has discouraged humanitarian groups from rescuing migrants in sinking boats; Italy has repeatedly blocked vessels carrying migrants from disembarking in its waters.

Unrecorded deaths have legal ramifications. People who can't prove that a spouse has died find it difficult to remarry. The relatives of missing migrants face challenges when filing civil suits or joining criminal proceedings against smugglers accused of overloading boats or sending faulty ships to sea. When governments are at fault, it is difficult for families to hold them accountable. In late June, about two thousand migrants and refugees from Sudan and other African countries tried to scale a border fence between Morocco and Melilla, a Spanish enclave. Dozens were injured in a stampede, and security forces in Morocco savagely beat the migrants and shot them with rubber bullets. On the other side of the fence, Spanish guards tear-gassed them. At least twenty-three people were killed, and seventy-seven were reported missing. In the days afterward, the Moroccan Association for Human Rights posted photographs on Twitter showing freshly dug graves, and alleged that the government planned to bury the deceased without identifying them, alerting their families, or investigating the causes of their deaths. (The Spanish Ministry of the Interior has stated that its security forces, and those of Morocco, "acted in a proportional and temperate manner.")

Psychiatrists call the emotional purgatory of not knowing whether a loved one is dead "ambiguous loss." Family members suffer the pain of knowing that a loved one is likely gone, but are denied the rituals of mourning—burial, funeral—that allow them to move on. "From a clinical point of view, the symptoms are quite similar to those of people tortured," Marzia Marzagalia, a psychiatrist in Milan who treats migrants, told me. Those suffering from ambiguous loss often struggle with sleeping and eating, have nightmares, feel that they are in danger, and experience obsessive ideation and physical pain. Ambiguous loss can also lead to depression and alcoholism, and has been linked to cancer, gastrointestinal disorders, and immunological diseases. "I have a mother who lost three children," Marzagalia said. "She didn't see them die on the boat. She left with them and arrived alone. And she goes on looking for them."

Cattaneo, of LABANOF, the forensic lab, is fifty-eight and slight, with curly, dyed-blond hair, a scratchy voice, and a forceful bearing. She speaks quickly in both Italian and English, and generally expects others to get to the point quickly, too. She grew up in Montreal, studied biomedical sciences at McGill University, and co-founded LABANOF, in 1995. In its early years, the lab primarily worked to identify the victims of murders or accidental deaths in Milan. "If the body doesn't have a name, how can you start investigating the crime?" she said. In 2007, Cattaneo's lab spurred the creation of Italy's Special Office of the Commissioner for Missing Persons, which now coördinates identification efforts. In 2012, the lab created a national database that collected photographs of unidentified bodies, the country's first. Three years later, two Croatian sisters found a photo of their father, who had been missing for twenty years, and learned that he had died suddenly on a work trip to Milan; they had always believed that he had walked out on their family. "Twenty-five years ago, many of the unidentified bodies that we were doing autopsies on were migrants from Ukraine or Romania," Cattaneo said. "But never like this."



On October 3, 2013, Cattaneo was in Geneva, speaking at the International Committee of the Red Cross, when she saw the news that a migrant boat had sunk less than two miles from Lampedusa's coast—one of the first big disasters of what came to be called the "migrant crisis." Five hundred and eighteen people had been on board, and most had died. "I was outraged," Cattaneo recalled. None of their families would ever know what happened to them. Cattaneo agitated the Special Office of the Commissioner for Missing Persons to allow the lab to identify the victims. People thought that the process would be too onerous, she told me, and that the families wouldn't care about learning their relatives' fates. "We said, Let's try," Cattaneo recalled. "Let's do one pilot study."

The police had already recovered the bodies from the wreck and taken photographs and DNA samples. They were able to identify a hundred and fifty people, and asked Cattaneo's lab to help with a hundred and seventy-six more. The Italian missing-persons office requested that Sudanese and Eritrean embassies in other European countries announce that Italy was trying to identify victims from the boat. In the months that followed, eighty families paid their own way from Denmark, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in Europe to meet with Cattaneo's team, in Milan and Rome. They carried photographs of missing family members and brought relatives who could give DNA samples; one family brought nail clippings from a grandmother who could not travel, in case they proved useful. On the morning of the meetings in Milan, Cattaneo found several families sleeping on benches in the lobby of the lab. At the meetings in Rome, an older Eritrean man, whose son had gone missing, sat in a corridor of a government building watching CNN footage of a recovery effort after a recent plane crash. "He was seeing everyone run for those people," Cattaneo said. "But he had waited a year for someone to move a finger for his son."

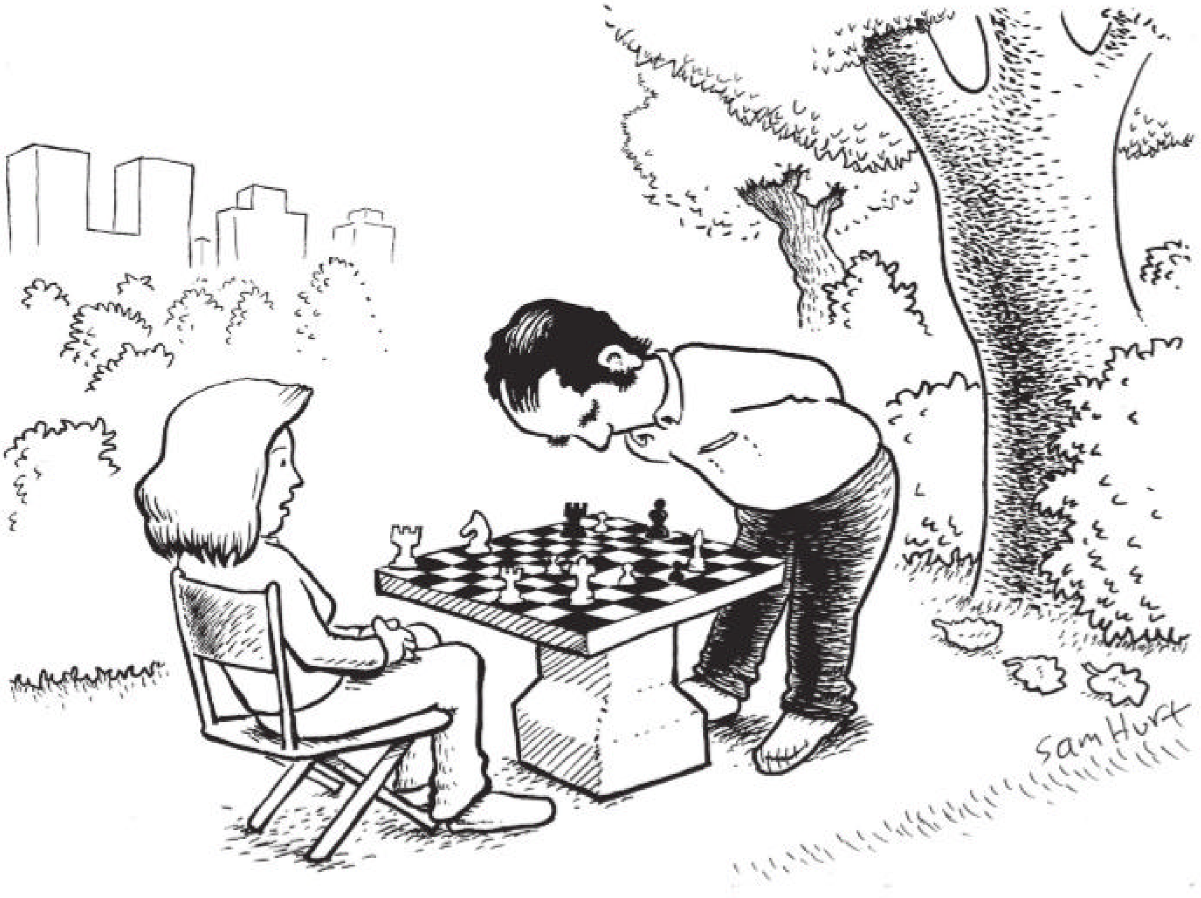
In some instances, when the bodies were well preserved, Cattaneo's team was able to make quick identifications using recognizable tattoos or dental superimpositions. She identified a dozen bodies within days, with photographs provided by relatives. "They were showing us the Facebook profile of the missing person, and you had amazing pictures of tattoos, people on the beach with the smiles showing the dental profile—and you can identify with that," she said. One Eritrean woman was looking for her nephew, who had just graduated from high school and had ritual facial scarring; Cattaneo soon identified his body. The son of the man who had been watching CNN had a tattoo of a cross, and Cattaneo found him as well. In the end, Cattaneo's lab and the police identified about sixty per cent of the people whom the families were searching for. "It showed that you can identify these migrants, and that people are looking for their loved ones," Cattaneo said. "I was really happy to prove people wrong."

This past March, I visited Cattaneo on the campus of the State University of Milan, in Città Studi, the city's academic district. Her office, just above the lab, is big and homey, with a red couch covered in letters and anatomy books. A replica of Michelangelo's last Pietà—representing empathy for the relatives of the dead, she told me—stood near the room where her team meets with migrants' family members, at the top of a staircase that leads to the city morgue. Outside, it had been sunny, but downstairs the lab was cool, lit by fluorescent lights. One lecture hall had a ceramic table on which Mussolini's autopsy had been performed.

Cattaneo took me to a room containing human remains from a shipwreck. Hundreds of beige boxes stacked along a wall held personal belongings that had been found on the boat: love letters, I.D. cards, wallets, glasses, headphones, toothbrushes, jewelry, Fanta soda cans, prayer books. I saw children's socks and school report cards. Cattaneo showed me bundles of photographs of shipwreck victims at weddings, graduations, birthdays. There was also a stack of thank-you notes from families whose relatives had been identified. "The main reason, for me, to identify the dead is to respect the mental health of the living," Cattaneo said.

Since the lab's early days, it has received no state funding, relying instead on grants from nonprofits. In between criminal investigations and teaching at the university, Cattaneo has to squeeze in her migrant-identification work, with help from a volunteer team of devoted forensic anthropologists and graduate students. The lab has solved fifty cases. But there are still four hundred and thirty open cases from sixty-eight shipwrecks on which the team has gathered data. Cattaneo said, of her team's work so far, "This was done to prove a point, but it can't be it."

The successes can be gratifying. Last year, she took on a case for Abraham Gmichael, an Eritrean immigrant living in Australia. Gmichael's brother-in-law Abrahele, a teacher, had resisted Eritrea's compulsory military service and, at thirty, with a wife and three young children at home, decided to make his way to Europe. He planned to bring his family once he was settled. Gmichael had lost touch with Abrahele in October, 2013, around the time of the Lampedusa shipwreck. When Gmichael's family heard that the boat had sunk, they suspected that Abrahele had been on board. "It was horrific," Gmichael recalled. "You can't even express it in words." Abrahele's wife lost consciousness and fell. "It was scary. Not only him—I had neighbors, close friends, who lost their lives. It was chaos. Many people around me were grieving." Last year, Gmichael tried to sponsor Abrahele's wife—Gmichael's wife's sister—and children to join his family in Australia. But the Australian Department of Home Affairs required Abrahele's death certificate.



"Do you normally play online?"

Gmichael spoke to Tareke Brhane, an Eritrean activist in Italy who has become one of the most prominent advocates for migrants in Europe. Brhane contacted Cattaneo. He then helped the International Organization for Migration obtain DNA samples from Abrahele's children, who were in Ethiopia, and Cattaneo tested the samples against the DNA extracted from the shipwreck victims. The samples were a match. "It was a case where you had three children, and then, zoom, you bang in on the DNA," she said. Abrahele had died on the boat, and Cattaneo knew where his body had been buried. His widow and children are now preparing to move to Australia. "It feels amazing," Gmichael said. "His parents, when they heard that his death certificate was ready, they celebrated. Because now we know that he actually lost his life. It makes a big difference to them."

But the work is not always so straightforward. In 2015, another migrant boat sank between Libya and Lampedusa. The vessel, a twenty-metre fishing boat, had been carrying roughly a thousand people. Italy arrested the traffickers, who had charged passengers twelve hundred to eighteen hundred dollars for passage—extra if they wanted life jackets—and had cut marks on the heads of those who disobeyed orders; they had also forced passengers to sit on the hatch of the hull once it started filling with water, to stop people inside from escaping. Two men were convicted of human trafficking and manslaughter. A year after the boat

GINGLE PINGLE

"This is that cool new drinks place I was telling you about."

sank, Italy raised it from the sea and tugged it to the Sicilian town of Melilli. The Special Office of the Commissioner for Missing Persons asked Cattaneo's lab and other universities to perform autopsies on the bodies before they were put in coffins and buried. "When the fire brigade opened the boat, there were layers and layers and layers of dead bodies face down," Cattaneo recalled. "I tried to put my arm in to see if I could reach the last layer, and I couldn't feel it. It gives you the impression of what kind of an end they met, and how desperate they must have been to have travelled in that situation." There were dozens more bodies below the cargo hold and in the space where the anchor chains should have been stored. Cattaneo saw skeletons of adolescents under the floorboards. The way people had been crammed onto the boat reminded her of images she had seen of slave ships. The victims were from Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Bangladesh, and elsewhere; half were between the ages of thirteen and seventeen.

Cattaneo and her team did autopsies for three straight months, inside a hangar on a military base in Melilli that overlooked the sea. While performing an autopsy on a nineteen-year-old boy, Cattaneo found that he was carrying a plastic bag of soil; she wondered at first if it was drugs. But when her team found other passengers with similar bags, she learned that they were carrying earth from their home countries. It made her think of the summers she spent as a child in her ancestral village, in northern Italy, and then having to return to Canada; she would break off twigs from trees and put them in the pages of her books. "I was surprised, and ashamed that I was surprised," she said. The International Committee of the Red Cross worked with Cattaneo's lab to get DNA profiles from a hundred and twenty families, and to interview survivors, people who had tried to board the boat but were turned away, and smugglers. But identification was more difficult than it had been with the Lampedusa wreck. Because the boat had been underwater for a year, most of the victims' faces had dissolved, and some of their remains had commingled, making DNA testing difficult. The lab identified just six people from the wreckage.

Back in 2013, a week after the October 3rd sinking, another boat had sunk in Maltese waters. Some three hundred Syrian migrants, many of them children, drowned. Officers with the Italian Coast Guard were arrested for failing to help, despite receiving several distress calls. (The case never went to trial, and the statute of limitations for the charges expired in 2022.) "Italy was saying it's Malta's responsibility, and Malta was saying it was Italy's responsibility, and they all died because it was nobody's responsibility," Cattaneo said. She interviewed several Syrian parents and took DNA samples from them. One father, a doctor, told Cattaneo that all three of his children had disappeared when the boat capsized. But Cattaneo has not identified any bodies from the wreck. The lab had only twenty-one bodies; Malta reported having twenty-eight. The rest were likely still in the sea. "None of the people who gave us their DNA have their loved ones among the cadavers," Cattaneo said. "And nobody is talking about raising other boats."

In the lab, Cattaneo and a colleague, a forensic anthropologist named Debora Mazzarelli, turned to Wildmikael's case. They had been trying for months to verify that Biniam was in the October 3rd shipwreck. The survivors had compiled a list of possible passengers, and he was on it. Cattaneo and Mazzarelli saw a photograph of a corpse with a facial structure that resembled Biniam's—"Nobody else looked like him," Cattaneo said—though it was hard to be sure. The body was bloated, and the photographs that Wildmikael had sent were out of focus. But they sent Wildmikael pictures of the corpse, and she felt sure that it was him. When Wildmikael had first heard the news that Biniam might be dead, she was angry—that he had left her, that he had never got to truly know his son. But when she saw the photographs she cried. "I realized he had actually died," Wildmikael said. "Once I saw the picture, I realized it was real." Still, identifications using visual clues such as photographs, without scientific support, are wrong thirty per cent of the time. Cattaneo's lab needed more. She decided to run a

DNA test to see if the body was a match with Yafet. "You know how many cases we have where we're so close?" she said.

The island of Lampedusa exists in an uneasy tension: it is both a holiday destination, because of its white-sand beaches, and the first stop for migrants crossing the Mediterranean, because it is the closest Italian point to Africa. I recently visited the island with a group of activists from the 3rd of October Committee, an N.G.O. created after the Lampedusa shipwreck. The group was led by Brhane, the Eritrean activist in Italy. Tall and lanky, with a cloud of black hair and an easy way with strangers, he had spent four years in Libyan detention centers before finally making it to Europe and receiving asylum. "I still question, How did I cross the desert, survive the prisons and the violence, and I'm still smiling?" Brhane said. We had spent the day at a school on the island, where Brhane and his colleagues spoke about why people leave their homes to come to Europe. Afterward, Brhane visited a cemetery where migrants are buried in unmarked graves. Flowers from townspeople adorned several headstones. The group had been pushing local political leaders to memorialize the deaths of unidentified migrants. "We're going to go all over cities in Sicily trying to map who is buried there, who has a name or not," Brhane said.

The October 3rd sinking was an unprecedented event in Italy. "For the first time, the sea gave us back the bodies," Brhane said. "Nobody could say they did not know. Nobody could say they did not see it." For about six months, he went on, Italian politicians and the country's media showed compassion for migrant deaths. But then their attention drifted elsewhere. Every October, his organization holds a weekend of events on Lampedusa to preserve the incident in the national memory; survivors and relatives of the missing, including a Syrian couple who lost their children, come to the island. "It's difficult because a lot of families still believe their relatives are alive," Brhane said. "Only a small percentage have the bodies to test the DNA. The majority are in the sea, and the Italian government does not want to spend the money to bring them out. They are waiting for answers that we cannot give them. They are suffering."

Thirteen per cent of the bodies of migrants who died on journeys between 2014 and 2019 have been recovered, according to estimates. The rest are still at the bottom of the Mediterranean or decomposing in North African deserts. "Seventy per cent of the bodies no longer exist," Baraybar, of the International Committee of the Red Cross, told me. "So we also have to do forensics without bodies. Their fate can only be inferred." A group of Tunisian mothers looking for their sons had given samples of their DNA to the lab, but Cattaneo had no bodies or genetic profiles from the relevant shipwrecks to test them against. "You just feel this huge sense of responsibility," she said. "You know that most of the time you won't be able to give them an answer." Even when Cattaneo has the bodies, it's difficult to find the families they belong to. She relies on activists, like Brhane, who are connected to migrant diasporas. "Where do you get hold of the relatives? How?" she said. "Some may be in the countries of origin, some may be in transition, some may already be in Europe."

Cattaneo believed that European countries should be forced to recover bodies from their waters and to pay for autopsies, outreach, and DNA testing. The countries should then store this information on a database. "These countries have not experienced a missing-persons problem at this level since the Balkans or World War Two, so those mechanisms, to be fair, don't exist," Bomberger, of the International Commission on Missing Persons, said. "But the numbers of missing persons around the world is on the rise. Cristina's a hero, but it can't be the burden of one woman to deal with twenty thousand disappearances."

Few European leaders agree. "Not only is the problem not considered a problem for lots of political actors—it's a great angle for a right-wing government to leverage for their own benefit," Simon Robins, a researcher on humanitarian protections, said. Baraybar believes that, as long as countries don't modify their migration policies, "a magical solution doesn't exist," because so few bodies are recovered. It cost Italy 9.5 million euros to raise the Melilli boat from the water; raising more vessels could be prohibitively expensive. Conservative politicians have argued that migrants are crossing the sea by choice and know the potential consequences. Lena Düpont, a German member of the European Parliament, told me that money would be better spent on efforts to prevent migration in the first place, including investing in development in sub-Saharan Africa and continuing partnerships with the Libyan Coast Guard to stop migrants from reaching Europe. "It's not that we don't care about those who

CITY OPERA
TONIGHT
THE ONES THAT GO
Bom-BOM ba-dom dom
Da da da TAtada
La di da dada DAH da daah
LEIGHTON

drown in the Mediterranean," Düpont said. She later added, "We want to prevent dead bodies from being thrown to the shores of our union. . . . We need to focus on having the right instruments in hand, and a functioning system, for preventing those deaths, given that we do have tight resources at the European level." Meanwhile, anti-migrant sentiment continues to sweep through Europe. "Stop landings" was a popular slogan during Italy's elections last year, in which Giorgia Meloni, a far-right nationalist, was elected Prime Minister. "Italy cannot accept tens of thousands of immigrants who only bring problems," Matteo Salvini, a former interior minister, said, days before a recent visit to Lampedusa. "Italy is not Europe's refugee camp."

During my visit to Milan, I sat in on a virtual meeting between Cattaneo and Pierfrancesco Majorino, another member of the European Parliament. Majorino had arranged for Cattaneo to testify before Parliament in support of a bill on migrant identification. "They're hearing us for six whole minutes," Cattaneo told me dryly. The bill would make European countries responsible for identifying the bodies of migrants found in their waters and create a database that humanitarian organizations could use to identify them. "The core of your message should be that Europe needs to recognize the right of identification," Majorino told her. Cattaneo said, "We've met hundreds of families who have brought us information, and it's just not getting across, and nobody's doing anything. It's morally outrageous."

Even with such a law in place, the work would remain difficult. "It's not like an air crash, where you have two hundred victims and you have a passenger list," Cattaneo said. "It's more like a tsunami, but it's even more difficult because you don't have one tragedy on one date. You have thousands of disasters—and small disasters. One fishing boat with five victims, the other one's a thousand." She believed that Europe could make the journey less brutal in the first place, allowing migrants to travel safely through humanitarian corridors. "There shouldn't be all these dead people," Cattaneo said. "It's crazy." Russian troops had invaded Ukraine a few weeks earlier, and Europe had been extraordinarily welcoming to refugees. Germany and Austria were offering free train rides, and the European Union had activated, for the first time, a "temporary protection directive," which allowed Ukrainian refugees to remain in Europe for at least a year, with the right to work and to use social services. "It is done for Ukrainians because they are Ukrainians and not sub-Saharan Africans," Cattaneo said. Majorino replied, "There is no doubt that their origin is the deciding factor."

This past spring, I visited Wildmikael at her home in Vacha. It was her day off—she worked in the warehouse of an online retailer—and she was wearing a lemon-yellow sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. She made tea and prepared a plate of spaghetti, then led me to her living room, which was decorated with candles and plants. She had dedicated part of a wall to photographs of her family and of classmates from her German-language class. Brhane had recently arranged to have a DNA sample taken from her son, Yafet, which Cattaneo would test against the body that had been recovered from the October 3rd wreck. "I'm a little scared," Wildmikael said.

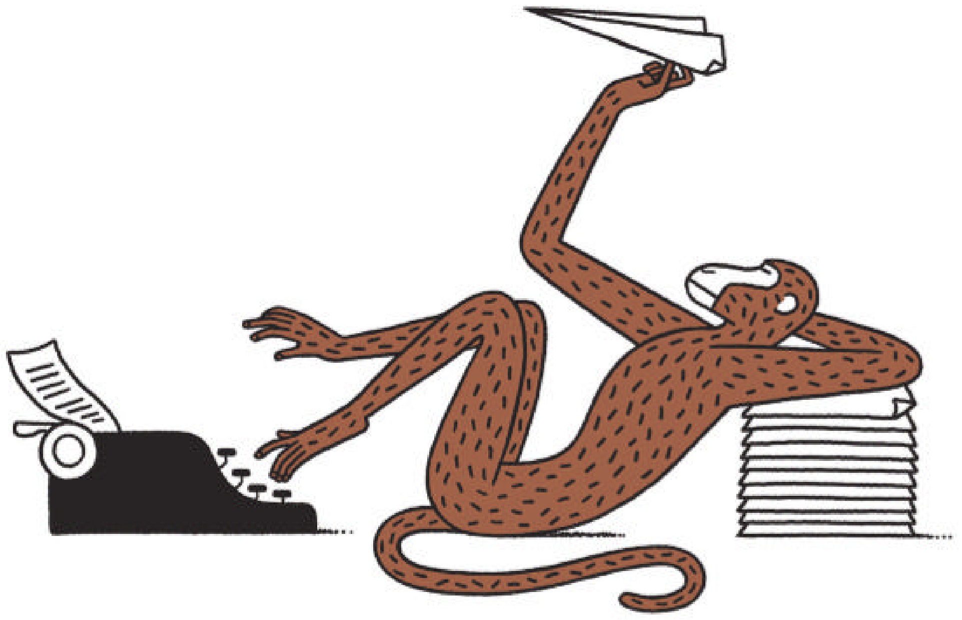
In September, Cattaneo learned the result: the DNA samples did not match. At first, Cattaneo considered the possibility that the body was in fact Biniam's but that he was not really Yafet's father. Yet Wildmikael insisted that he was the only man she had ever been with. Cattaneo analyzed the samples again, but got another negative result. In the end, she decided that the body was probably not Biniam's, after all. "The geneticist said it's either some very rare—though we don't know how frequent it is in sub-Saharan populations—mutation or it's not him," Cattaneo said. She had also checked Yafet's DNA against all of the lab's genetic profiles from the wreck, but none had matched. "This boy's father could have never been recovered from the sea," she said. "Maybe he was in another shipwreck." Wildmikael, after several months of waiting, was incredulous when she heard the news, and then devastated. "The only thing I am sure of is that he died on the way to Italy," she said. "Apart from that, I don't know if that is the body of the father of my son."

On my last day in Milan, Cattaneo and I walked through the city toward Piazza del Duomo. The missing-migrants crisis was not confined to Europe. The remains of hundreds of deceased migrants are found at the U.S.-Mexico border every year, and families rely on volunteers to piece together the fate of loved ones. "Knowing whether your son is dead or not is a fundamental right," Cattaneo told me. "In other historical periods, the dead were treated with more respect." She said that she was ready, if necessary, to sue on behalf of family members of the missing: "If the European Parliament, having known all this information, consciously says, 'We don't care, we won't do anything about this,' then we start the class-action lawsuit."

Wildmikael was now one of countless people who would probably never know what happened to a missing relative. "We have so many people in situations like this," Gmichael, the Eritrean whose brother-in-law was identified, told me. "So many young people have lost their lives, and their parents don't know where they are for more than ten, fifteen years." Gmichael had heard of fathers calling on community elders to help fabricate stories about missing children in order to soothe mothers who needed closure. "The story of almost every household in Eritrea is so terrible," he said.

Wildmikael recently submitted a visa application for Yafet. Biniam had now been missing for almost ten years, which could make the application easier to file, and she also included the survivors' manifest of the October 3rd shipwreck, which listed Biniam as having been on board. If Yafet's application wasn't successful, he could apply again when he turned eighteen, in four years, at which point the barriers for him to come to Germany would be lower. But four years was a long time. Although Wildmikael talked to her son every day, she could no longer remember what it was like to be with him in person. And she had to make peace with the fact that she would probably never know what happened to Biniam. "He was the father of my son, and now he's dead, and they don't believe me," she said. "I just need an answer." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE INFINITE-MONKEY THEOREM: FIELD NOTES

BY REUVEN PERLMAN

12/3/22, 7:30 A.M.
Day 1 of being embedded with the elusive writer monkeys. It's magnificent. Monkeys and typewriters as far as the eye can see. What strikes me immediately, though, is the absence of any and all writing. Before arriving, I'd steeled myself for a deafening cacophony of tapping keys, margin bells, and the mechanical slides of carriage-return levers. But so far the only thing I've seen typed is "Title TK TK TK," written by Monkey No. 3566, who then took a break to lie on the rug and listen to a podcast. Will one of these monkeys independently re-create the works of William Shakespeare? Only time will tell. What is immediately clear is that this subspecies of simian has a fondness for vintage shawl-collar sweaters, obscure jazz on vinyl, and packed bookshelves with rolling library ladders.

12/4/22, 10:34 A.M.
My presence is now widely known, and any prior concerns about my being rejected by the group have been quashed. In fact, having learned that I'm not a literary agent or a publisher and that I have no connections in Hollywood, the monkeys have started to ignore me entirely.

12/5/22, 8:30 P.M.
We had some action this morning. The monkeys all sat at their desks for more than three hours—however, most of them just spun in their chairs and gazed at the ceiling. One monkey played around with a Rubik's Cube but didn't solve it. Another tweezed its knuckles.

12/10/22, 7:04 P.M.
Still no writing. It's been a week. What's even stranger is that these monkeys seem to derive as much satisfaction from creating a *plan* to write as they would from actually writing, often rewarding themselves with chocolate-dipped bananas just for making to-do lists. Before taking a nap, Monkey No. 089 looked me in the eyes and used sign language to say, "I'll really hit the ground running tomorrow."

12/11/22, 10:14 A.M.
Monkey No. 089 has not hit the ground running.

12/13/22, 1:15 P.M.
The monkeys discovered coffee today. Though hopes were high that a stimulant would aid their creative process, those hopes were dashed when, having drunk several cups each, the monkeys just paced around ruminating on regrets from their past. One, Monkey No. 277, had a full-on panic attack.

8:34 P.M. Once the coffee wore off, the monkeys did crosswords for nearly two hours. It looked as though the puzzles were all Mondays and Tuesdays.

12/15/22, 10:33 P.M.
The monkeys ate gummy worms and smoked cigarettes for, honest to God, the entire day. The only glimmer of hope for creative output came when one monkey appeared disappointed in herself and put her cigarettes in a drawer ten feet away. She then sat at her typewriter again and set an egg timer. I theorize that she was hoping to *earn* a cigarette by writing uninterrupted for a full hour. But, after a few minutes, she opened the drawer again and lit a cigarette.

12/17/22, 12:03 P.M.
Monkey No. 456333 is sitting in full workout gear on a yoga mat, scrolling Twitter.

1:20 P.M. Monkey No. 884 has taken up baking.

4:00 P.M. Monkeys No. 11654, No. 901289, and No. 125 are watching "The Sopranos" from the beginning. I overheard one of them call it "research."

12/24/22, 7:00 P.M.
A breakthrough! While most monkeys continued to do what I can only describe as "nothing," Monkey No. 7160043—nicknamed Coco—experienced a ninety-minute burst of creative energy and has successfully and independently written the entirety of Shakespeare's "Hamlet"! The theorem has been confirmed!

7:03 P.M. Coco is ecstatic. I've never seen a monkey so exuberant.

7:09 P.M. The initial sense of accomplishment apparently having worn off, Coco is now rereading the manuscript with a furrowed brow.

7:10 P.M. In a devastating yet fascinating turn of events, Coco has lit her copy of "Hamlet" on fire.

7:18 P.M. Coco announced her retirement from writing. She plans to apply to grad school in the fall.

12/25/22, 5:46 P.M.
No writing today. One of the monkeys has taken up guitar. ♦

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

THOUGHT PROCESS

What really goes on between our ears?

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

I was nineteen, maybe twenty, when I realized I was empty-headed. I was in a college English class, and we were in a sunny seminar room, discussing "For Whom the Bell Tolls," or possibly "The Waves." I raised my hand to say something and suddenly realized that I had no idea what I planned to say. For a moment, I panicked. Then the teacher called on me, I opened my mouth, and words emerged. Where had they come from? Evidently, I'd had a thought—that was why I'd raised my hand. But I hadn't known what the thought would be until I spoke it. How weird was that?

Later, describing the moment to a friend, I recalled how, when I was a kid, my mother had often asked my father, "What are you thinking?" He'd shrug and say, "Nothing"—a response that irritated her to no end. ("How can he be thinking about *nothing*?" she'd ask me.) I've always been on Team Dad; I spend a lot of time thoughtless, just living life. At the same time, whenever I speak, ideas condense out of the mental cloud. It was happening even then, as I talked with my friend: I was articulating thoughts that had been unspecified yet present in my mind.

My head isn't entirely word-free; like many people, I occasionally talk to myself in an inner monologue. (Remember the milk! Ten more reps!) On the whole, though, silence reigns. Blankness, too: I see hardly any visual images, rarely picturing things, people, or places. Thinking happens as a kind of pressure behind my eyes, but I need to talk out loud in order to complete most of my thoughts. My wife, consequently, is the other half of my brain. If no interlocutor is available, I write. When that fails, I pace my empty house, muttering. I sometimes go for a swim just to talk to myself far from shore, where no one can hear me. My minimalist mental theatre has shaped my life. I'm an inveterate talker, a professional writer, and a lifelong photographer—a heady person who's determined to get things out of my head, to a place where I can apprehend them.

I'm scarcely alone in having a mental "style," or believing I do. Ask someone how she thinks and you might learn that she talks to herself silently, or cogitates visually, or moves through mental space by traversing physical space. I have a friend who thinks during yoga, and another who browses and compares mental photographs. I know a scientist who plays interior Tetris, rearranging proteins in his dreams. My wife often wears a familiar faraway look; when I see it, I know that she's rehearsing a complex drama in her head, running all the lines. She sometimes pronounces an entire sentence silently before speaking it out loud.

In the recent book "Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gifts of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns, and Abstractions," Temple Grandin explains that her mind is filled with detailed images, which she can juxtapose, combine, and revise with verve and precision. Grandin, an animal behaviorist and an agricultural engineer at Colorado State University, has worked designing elements of slaughterhouses and other farm structures; when tasked with estimating the cost of a new building, she looks at her plans, then compares them in her mind with remembered images of past projects. Just by thinking visually, she can accurately estimate that the new building will be twice or three-quarters the cost of one that's come before. After the pandemic began, she read a lot about how medications can help our bodies fight COVID-19; as she read, she developed a detailed visual analogy in which the body was a

Visual thinkers and verbal thinkers may represent points on a continuum.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIGUEL PORLAN

military base under siege. When she thought about cytokine storms—events in which the immune system becomes over-activated, causing out-of-control inflammation—she didn't conceptualize the idea in words. Instead, she writes, "I see the soldiers in my immune system going berserk. They become confused and start attacking the base and lighting it on fire."

Reading Grandin's book, I often found myself wishing that I were more visual. My mental snapshots of growing up are flimsy—I'm never quite sure whether I'm recalling or imagining them. But Grandin easily accesses "clear pictorial memories" of her childhood, complete with "three-dimensional pictures and videos." She vividly recalls "coasting down snow-covered hills on toboggans or flying saucers," and can even feel the lift and dip of the sled as it bumps down the slope; she effortlessly pictures the delicate three-stranded silk she held between her fingers in embroidery class, in elementary school. If her mind is an IMAX theatre, mine is a fax machine.

In the early twentieth century, novels like "Ulysses," "Mrs. Dalloway," and "In Search of Lost Time" asked us to look inside ourselves, at our own minds. Grandin's book, similarly, directs our attention to what William James called "the stream of consciousness"—the ongoing flow of thoughts in our heads. "Our mental life, like a bird's life, seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings," James wrote. His aquatic and avian metaphors have a decorous quality; they decline to over-specify what's going on in our minds. Grandin's writing does the opposite, describing with striking concreteness what's happening in her head and, possibly, yours. Her precise descriptions accentuate differences between minds. In a 1974 essay titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," the philosopher Thomas Nagel argued that we'd never know, because "bat sonar" differs so profoundly from human vision as to make it unimaginable. Grandin and I aren't *that* far apart, but I struggle to imagine having a mind as extraordinarily visual as hers.

At the same time, Grandin and I have many of the same ideas. We both understand cost overruns and cytokine storms; we arrive, by divergent routes, at the same destinations. How different do our minds really make us? And what should we make of our differences?

Grandin, who is on the autism spectrum, came to prominence in 1995, when she published "Thinking in Pictures," a memoir that chronicled her years-long search for a way to put her visual and perceptual gifts to use. She found a home in agricultural engineering, where she was capable of visualizing farm buildings from the animals' perspective. Visiting a slaughterhouse where animals were often panicked, she could instantly see how small visual elements, such as a hanging chain or a reflection in a puddle, were distracting them and causing confusion. "Thinking in Pictures" made the case for the value of neurodiversity: Grandin's unusual mind succeeded where others couldn't. In "Visual Thinking," she sharpens her argument, proposing that word-centric people have sidelined other kinds of thinkers. Verbal minds, she argues, run our boardrooms, newsrooms, legislatures, and schools, which have cut back on shop class and the arts, while subjecting students to a daunting array of written standardized tests. The result is a crisis in American ingenuity. "Imagine a world with no artists, industrial designers, or inventors," Grandin writes. "No electricians, mechanics, architects, plumbers, or builders. These are our visual thinkers, many hiding in plain sight, and we have failed to understand, encourage, or appreciate their specific contributions."

In "Thinking in Pictures," Grandin suggested that the world was divided between visual and verbal thinkers. "Visual Thinking" gently revises the idea, identifying a continuum of thought styles that's roughly divisible into three sections. On one end are verbal thinkers, who often solve problems by talking about them in their heads or, more generally, by proceeding in the linear, representational fashion typical of language. (Estimating the cost of a building project, a verbal thinker might price out all the components, then sum them using a spreadsheet—an ordered, symbol-based approach.) On the other end of the continuum are "object visualizers": they come to conclusions through the use of concrete, photograph-like mental images, as Grandin does when she compares building plans in her mind. In between those poles, Grandin writes, is a second group of visual thinkers—"spatial visualizers," who seem to combine language and image, thinking in terms of visual patterns and abstractions.

Grandin proposes imagining a church steeple. Verbal people, she finds, often make a hash of this task, conjuring something like "two vague lines in an inverted V," almost as though they've never seen a steeple before. Object visualizers, by contrast, describe specific steeples that they've observed on actual churches: they "might as well be staring at a photograph or photorealistic drawing" in their minds. Meanwhile, the spatial visualizers picture a kind of perfect but abstract steeple—"a generic New England-style steeple, an image they piece together from churches they've seen." They have noticed patterns among church steeples, and they imagine the pattern, rather than any particular instance of it.

Grandin likes the idea that there are two kinds of visual thinkers, because it helps make sense of differences between like-minded people. It takes visual skill to engineer a machine and to repair it; the engineer and the mechanic are both visual thinkers, and yet they differ. In Grandin's account, an engineer is likely to be a spatial visualizer who can picture, in the abstract, how all the parts of the engine will work, while the mechanic is likely to be an object visualizer, who can at a glance understand whether a ding on an engine cylinder is functionally consequential or just cosmetic. Artists and artisans, Grandin suggests, tend to be object visualizers: they can picture exactly how *this* painting should look, how *this* finial should flow, how *this* incision should be sewn up. Scientists, mathematicians, and electrical engineers tend to be spatial visualizers: they can imagine, in general, how gears will mesh and molecules will interact. Grandin describes an exercise, conducted by the Marine Corps, in which engineers and scientists with advanced degrees were pitted against radio repairmen and truck mechanics in performing technical tasks under pressure, such as "making a rudimentary vehicle out of a pile of junk." The engineers, with their abstract visual minds, tended to "overthink" in this highly practical scenario; they lost to the mechanics, who, in Grandin's telling, were likely to be "object visualizers whose abilities to see it, build it, and repair it were fused."

In seventh grade, I won the egg-drop competition in shop class, constructing a basket-and-parachute contraption that enabled my egg to survive being thrown off the second-story roof of my school. But I'm quite sure that I am not a visual thinker. Grandin's book includes excerpts from the Visual-Spatial Identifier, a yes-or-no test designed by the psychologist Linda Silverman to divide verbal people from visual ones:

> Do you think mainly in pictures instead of words?
> Do you know things without being able to explain how or why?
> Do you remember what you see and forget what you hear?
> Can you visualize objects from different perspectives?
> Would you rather read a map than follow verbal directions?

Visual people tend to answer yes to more of these questions; I answer no to almost all of them. Other tests in the book make it even clearer how much mental distance separates someone like me from someone like Grandin. Maria Kozhevnikov, a cognitive neuroscientist, has created tests to distinguish object visualizers from spatial visualizers; in one of them, the Grain Resolution Test, subjects are asked to judge in their minds the relative size and density of different objects. Imagine a pile of grapes. Are the grapes bigger than the spaces between the strings on a tennis racquet? Grandin reports that, when she took this test, she clearly saw, in her mind's eye, "the grapes being squashed because they were too big to fit through the spaces between the racquet strings." I came to the conclusion that the grapes were bigger—but my mind isn't clear-eyed enough to picture the grapes actually being squashed.

The imagistic minds in "Visual Thinking" can seem glamorous compared with the verbal ones depicted in "Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It," by Ethan Kross, a psychologist and neuroscientist who teaches at the University of Michigan. Kross is interested in what's known as the phonological loop—a neural system, consisting of an "inner ear" and an "inner voice," that serves as a "clearinghouse for everything related to words that occurs around us in the present." If Grandin's visual thinkers are attending Cirque du Soleil, then Cross's verbal thinkers are stuck at an Off Broadway one-man show. It's just one long monologue.

Psychologists who ask people about their phonological loops find that they're used for all kinds of things. Loops are a kind of memory scratch pad; they're where we store a phone number before we write it down. They're also tools for self-management. Young children learn to direct their emotions by talking to themselves, at first out loud and then silently, often channelling the admonishments or encouragements of their parents. ("Don't break it, Peter!" my four-year-old son said recently, as he tried to connect some Legos.) We use our inner voices to monitor our progress toward our goals—"almost like a tracking app on a phone," Kross writes. Researchers have found that goal-talk is pervasive in inner speech, with objectives popping up out of nowhere, like notifications on a screen. "Come on," we might tell ourselves, while trying to unstick a kitchen drawer. "You can do it! Also—remember that doctor's appointment. Now, back to the drawer!"

In the early twenty-tens, a British anthropologist named Andrew Irving went up to about a hundred random New Yorkers and asked them if they'd spend some time saying everything they were thinking into a small voice recorder. "An element of performance might have come into play," Kross concedes. Still, Irving's transcripts have the ring of truth. People used their inner voices to muse on attractive strangers and curse the traffic; often, they "dealt with negative 'content,' much of which sprang up through associative connections." One woman says, "I wonder if there's a Staples around here," before thinking suddenly about a friend's cancer diagnosis; she talks to herself about the bad news and then, just as suddenly, gets back on track: "Now, is there a Staples down there? I think there is." A man reflects

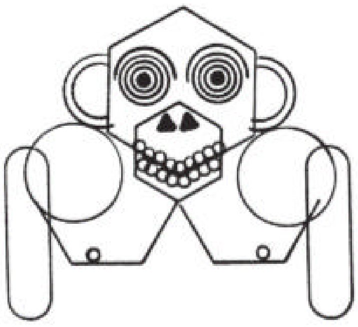
"Would you relax? They never look up."

on a broken relationship and gives himself encouragement: "Clear, totally clear. Move forward." It's easy to get stuck in your loop: monologues can be insistent, and some people succumb to circular, negative inner talk—what Kross calls "chatter"—and end up "desperate to escape their inner voice because of how bad it makes them feel." One of Irving's subjects can't stop wondering if her boyfriend, who is out of town, has died in a bus accident or run off with someone else. Kross tells the story of Rick Ankiel, a baseball player who had to leave pitching for the outfield because his inner voice wouldn't stop talking about "the individual physical components of his pitching motion."

People with inner monologues, Kross reports, often spend "a considerable amount of time thinking about *themselves*, their minds gravitating toward their own experiences, emotions, desires, and needs." This self-centeredness can spill over into our out-loud conversation. In the nineteen-eighties, the psychologist Bernard Rimé investigated what we'd now call venting—the compulsive sharing of negative thoughts with other people. Rimé found that bad experiences can inspire not only interior rumination but the urge to broadcast it. The more we share our unhappiness with others, the more we alienate them: studies of middle schoolers have shown that kids who think more about their bad experiences also vent more to their peers, and that this, in turn, leads to them "being socially excluded and rejected." Maybe there's another reason my dad, when asked what he was thinking, said, "Nothing." It can pay to keep your thoughts to yourself.

Kross's bottom line is that our inner voices are powerful tools that must be tamed. He ends his book with several dozen techniques for controlling our chatter. He advises trying "distanced self-talk": by using "your name and the second-person 'you' to refer to yourself," he writes, you can gain more command over your thinking. You might use your inner voice to pretend that you're advising a friend about his problems; you might redirect your thoughts toward how universal your experiences are (*It's normal to feel this way*), or contemplate how every new experience is a challenge you can overcome (*I have to learn to trust my partner*). The idea is to manage the voice that you use for self-management. Take advantage of the suppleness of dialogue. Don't just rehearse the same old scripts; send some notes to the writers' room.

Thinking in pictures, thinking in patterns, thinking in words—these are quite different experiences. But do thinkers themselves fall into such neat categories? In the nineteen-seventies, Russell T. Hurlburt, a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, came up with the idea of giving people devices that would beep at certain times and asking them to record what was going on in their heads at the sound of the beep. In theory, if they responded quickly enough, they'd offer an unvarnished look at what he called "pristine inner experience"—thought as it happens spontaneously. After spending decades working with hundreds of subjects, Hurlburt concluded that, broadly speaking, inner experience is made of five elements, which each of us mix in different proportions. Some thoughts are rendered in "inner speech," and others appear through "inner seeing"; some make themselves felt through our emotions (*I've got a bad feeling about this!*), while others manifest as a kind of "sensory awareness" (*The hairs on my neck stood on end!*). Finally, some people make use of "unsymbolized thinking." They often have "an explicit, differentiated thought that does not include the experience of words, images, or any other symbols."



Reading this description a few years ago, I felt at last that I had a term that described my mind: it's not "empty"; my thoughts are just unsymbolized. But Hurlburt's work suggests that it's a mistake to ascribe to oneself a definitive cast of thought. Most people, he's found, don't actually know how they think; asked to describe their minds pre-beeper, they are often wildly off the mark about what they'll report post-beeper. They're prone to make "faux generalizations"—groundless assertions about how they think. It's easy for me to assume that most of my thinking is unsymbolized. But how closely have I examined it? In truth, the textures of our minds are subtle and variable. There's a reason James Joyce needed eighteen chapters to describe the mind in "Ulysses." Even within a single head, thinking takes many forms.

Quantum physicists confront a problem with observation. Whenever they look at a particle, they alter and fix its quantum state, which otherwise would have remained indeterminate. A similar issue afflicts our attempts to understand how we think; thinking about our thinking risks forcing it into a form it does not have. In 2002, at an academic conference about the study of consciousness held in Tucson, Hurlburt debated this problem with Eric Schwitzgebel, a philosopher who is a well-known skeptic about our ability to describe what's in our minds. In a book called "Perplexities of Consciousness," Schwitzgebel points out that, during the nineteen-fifties, most people said that they dreamed in black-and-white, while in the nineteen-sixties they started saying that they dreamed in color. Surely, he argues, the colors of our dreams didn't change; what changed was the ubiquity of color film. It's tempting to say that, in reality, people dream in color—to suggest that people in the fifties were wrong about their dreams, and that people in the sixties were right about them. But Schwitzgebel thinks it's a mistake to categorize dreams one way or the other. "We should also consider the possibility that our dreams are neither color *nor* black-and-white," he writes. Dreams are unreal, and might not lend themselves to being described during waking life. In describing them, we give them a fixity they may not have.

After the Tucson conference, Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel published a book together, "Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic." The book is a dialogue built around eighteen moments in the mind of a beeper-wearing recent college graduate named Melanie. Hurlburt believes that it's possible to figure out what's happened in Melanie's head. Schwitzgebel thinks that a lot of what we say about what happens in our minds is intrinsically untrustworthy, because, in a sense, thinking is too dreamlike to be described. Ultimately, he suspects that "we may be fairly similar inside, though we answer questions about our experience differently."

The book is open-ended: it's up to us to judge who's right. Take Beep 2.3—the third beep on the second day that Melanie wore her beeper. Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel recount Melanie's experience:

> Melanie was standing in the bathroom and looking around, trying to make up a shopping list in her head. At the moment of the beep she had a mental image of a white pad of paper (the same writing tablet that she uses to write shopping lists) and of her hand writing the word "conditioner." Her hand in the image was in motion, and she could see the letters coming out from the tip of the pen. At the precise moment of the beep, the letter "d" (the fourth letter in "conditioner") was coming out.
>
> At the same time, Melanie was saying in her inner voice "con-di-tion-er," slowly, in sync with the word as she was writing it in the image.
>
> Also at the same time, she was aware that her toes were cold. This was a noticing or sensory awareness of the coldness that was present in her awareness at the last undisturbed moment before the beep. It did not seem to involve an explicit thought process.

There was, evidently, quite a lot going on in Melanie's mind at Beep 2.3. Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel debate what she has reported. Could she truly have been aware of all these things at the same time? Schwitzgebel has doubts. And yet in the nineteen-nineties Hurlburt used his method to interview Fran, a bank teller who described her mind as frequently filled with "as many as five or ten" visual images, all overlaid and occurring simultaneously, as in a multiple-exposure photograph. A battery of tests suggested that Fran might be right about her unusual experience: at the bank where she worked, Hurlburt writes, the tellers were always counting stacks of bills, and "Fran irritated her coworkers by repeatedly initiating conversations while counting, causing them to lose count. The simultaneous tasks of counting and conversing were impossible for her coworkers but simple for Fran."

Melanie's thought stream is funny, unsettling, layered, and rich. At Beep 3.1, we learn that "Melanie's boyfriend was asking a question about insurance letters." Her focus, however, "was not on what he was saying but on trying to remember the word 'periodontist.' She was thinking 'peri-, peri-,' to herself," in an inner voice that might also have been "slightly visual." Later that day, at Beep 3.2, Melanie was walking toward her car, "sensing, roughly, its big black shape" but mainly experiencing "a feeling of 'fogginess' and worry," of being "unable to think with her accustomed speed." At the moment of the beep, Melanie "was in the act of observing this fogginess," which seemed to exist "behind the eyes, involving a heaviness around the brow line." Just before Beep 6.4, she was throwing out some dried-up flowers. "I was thinking that those flowers had lasted for a nice long time," she tells Hurlburt. "It was just kind of an idle thought that was inner speech." She notes that at the exact moment of the beep she was hearing not the words themselves—"They lasted for a nice long time"—but "the echoes" of the words in her head.

Melanie's careful attention to her mind is inspiring; it's as though she's her own Molly Bloom. After reading Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel's book, I tried to emulate her by attending even more closely to my pristine inner experience. Did I, too, hear my thoughts—Get back to work! Put down your phone!—echoing in my head? Was I observing my feelings even as I felt them? How much could happen in my mind at the same time? I knew with certainty that I never wrote down anything on a visualized mental shopping list. But it remained difficult to say exactly *what* I did—perhaps because my thoughts are so often "unsymbolized," or because I didn't have a psychologist guiding me, or because, as soon as you start to think about your inner experience, it's no longer so pristine. Hurlburt would say that describing one's inner life is hard. Schwitzgebel would say that our inner lives are not necessarily describable. On a deep level, he contends, our own thinking is a little like bat sonar. We'll never know what it's really like.

Our thinking is mysterious to us. I ask my wife my mother's question—"What are you thinking?"—all the time, and on one level it's easy to answer: we can spend all day talking to each other, sharing our thoughts. But on another it's unanswerable. Simply by expressing our thoughts, we change them. To describe our thinking is to domesticate it. This is why communicating with other people is both hard and interesting, and why knowing your own mind can be such a difficult, diverting task.

If we can't say exactly how we think, then how well do we know ourselves? In an essay titled "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," the philosopher Daniel Dennett argued that a layer of fiction is woven into what it is to be human. In a sense, fiction is flawed: it's not true. But, when we open a novel, we don't hurl it to the ground in disgust, declaring that it's all made-up nonsense; we understand that being made up is actually the point. Fiction, Dennett writes, has a deliberately "indeterminate" status: it's true, but only on its own terms. The same goes for our minds. We have all sorts of inner experiences, and we live through and describe them in different ways—telling one another about our dreams, recalling our thoughts, and so on. Are our descriptions and experiences true or fictionalized? Does it matter? It's all part of the story.

Stories aren't real, and yet they're meaningful; we tell different stories about our minds, as we should, because our minds are different. The story I tell myself about my own thinking is useful to me. It helps me think, by giving me a handle on my mind when thinking gets slippery. The other day, I got stuck on a problem that troubled me. So I went for a swim, hoping to think it through. I wore a wetsuit against the cold water, and at first focussed only on the sensation of cold, and on steadying my breathing. But eventually I warmed up and relaxed. I treaded water a little way out from shore, buoyed by the waves, and prepared to think about my problem; I turned my mind toward it while I watched a seabird float nearby. Nothing happened for a while. I watched the bird, the clouds, the silver water. Then I sensed a thought in need of expression, as I'd known I would. I cleared my throat while the bird flew away. ♦

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PROFILES

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE

The executive leading Netflix's quest for worldwide domination.

BY RACHEL SYME

Bela Bajaria, Netflix's global head of television, follows a similar routine whether she's visiting Mumbai or Berlin or Seoul or Stockholm or any of the company's twenty-six foreign outposts. A black car brings her from the airport to a luxury hotel, perhaps the Four Seasons. She checks in and furiously answers e-mails from Los Angeles until it's time for a breakfast or a dinner or a midday meal with executives and creators. She wears her favorite "travel blazer," a designer jacket bejewelled on the breast pocket with the words "Art is truth." And, though she often stays "in country" for only a day or two at a time, she likes to schedule a "slate meeting" so that the local development team can fill her in on upcoming programs. On an afternoon not long ago, she was kicking off one such meeting at the company's Latin American headquarters, inside one of the tallest skyscrapers in Mexico City.

"Next time, I'll get to stay for a week, so I won't have to eat twenty-four tacos in twenty-four hours, like last time," she said to the room of assembled staff members.

Bajaria told me that the ideal Netflix show is what one of her V.P.s, Jinny Howe, calls a "gourmet cheeseburger," offering something "premium and commercial at the same time." She praised the Latin American group for its recent track record of making slick telenovelas that draw large audiences outside Spanish-speaking regions.

"It's been a lot of learning for other countries to do the type of very commercial things that this team did early on," she said. A onetime winner of the Miss India Universe beauty pageant, Bajaria has glossy black hair that she often pulls into a high ponytail. Her voice, which she joked is classic "L.A. Valley Girl," contributes to the impression that she's younger than her fifty-two years. Although she is ceaselessly on the road for work, she says that she never experiences jet lag, a claim corroborated by her invariably peppy demeanor. "Is there anything you still think we need to do in terms of making a bigger bet, or a fresh swing?" she asked.

Francisco Ramos, the natty V.P. of Latin American content, pointed to a screen at the front of the room and said, "We are taking the next step, because our competitors are going to be where we were five years ago." In the following hour, the executives ran through some two dozen projects. Ramos boasted that a true-crime series about a Mexican kidnapping scandal had generated so much interest that "even the President talked about it for four days in a row," and that in Colombia, where Netflix was filming a big-budget miniseries adaptation of Gabriel García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude," they were working to secure permission to transplant a rare chestnut tree onto the set. Another executive described "La Flor Más Bella," a comedy that would feature a spirited *morena* girl navigating a high school full of "Whitexicans."

"I'm getting such strong 'Never Have I Ever' vibes," Bajaria replied, referring to the American Netflix comedy co-created by her friend Mindy Kaling.

Bajaria's job isn't to decide which shows get made. According to the company, there is no master list of all the "local-language originals" in progress at any given time. But the decentralized system offers opportunities for what Bajaria calls "cross-cultural learnings." Under her leadership, Netflix acts like a universal power converter, plugging in and adapting successful show formats to different parts of the world. Bajaria asked the Latin American staffers whether they were "working with the Middle East" to remake some of their more popular shows.

"Yes, Egypt is working on 'Who Killed Sara?,' and they are doing 'Dark Desire' in South Africa," Ramos said. "France is also making a telenovela, and we're supporting that."

"Oh, in *France*?" Bajaria said approvingly.

At the end of the meeting, she left the team with a blunt exhortation to continue scaling up: "It's not a science. It's a big creative endeavor. But it's about recognizing that people like having more."

When Netflix was founded, in 1997, its ambition, almost quaint in retrospect, was to overhaul the movie-rental business. Users would subscribe to the service online and receive DVDs through the mail, a concept that Netflix's co-founder Reed Hastings liked to say he came up with after borrowing "Apollo 13" from a Blockbuster store and incurring a forty-dollar late fee. (His co-founder, Mark Randolph, has said that the story, like most marketing spin, is only "emotionally true.") But in 2007 the company introduced the nascent technology of streaming; for certain titles in the Netflix library—initially about a thousand and, soon, many more—users on their home computers had the novel option to "watch now." In 2010, the platform offered a digital-only subscription and Hastings told investors, "Three years ago, we were a DVD-by-mail company that offered some streaming. We are now a streaming company which also offers DVD by mail."

According to "It's Not TV," a recent history of HBO by Felix Gillette and John Koblin, Netflix began looking into making original programming in 2010, after HBO declined to enter a licensing deal. It was evident that, in order to build a lasting streaming library, the platform would have to control its own content. Television, at the time, was in the midst of the so-called golden age of cable, and executives at channels including HBO, AMC, and FX had reinvigorated the medium with ambitious serialized dramas that cultivated critical acclaim over mass appeal. Ted Sarandos—who served as Netflix's chief content officer before adding the title of co-C.E.O. with Hastings,

Bela Bajaria, who oversees Netflix's original TV series in the U.S. and abroad, says her goal is "to super-serve the audience."

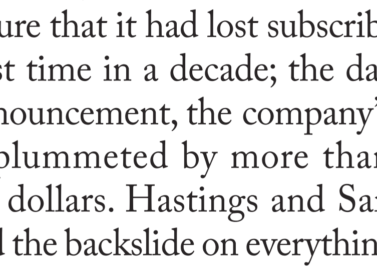
PHOTOGRAPH BY SELA SHILONI

in 2020—wanted to make the same kinds of shows for cord-cutters. He once said that the company's goal was "to become HBO faster than HBO can become us."

One of Sarandos's longtime collaborators, Cindy Holland, helped lead the company's initial push into television. During her tenure as the V.P. of original series, Netflix brought in such early shows as the political thriller "House of Cards," the royal roman-fleuve "The Crown," and the spiky women's-prison comedy "Orange Is the New Black." For a time, Netflix succeeded in positioning itself as a leading purveyor of bold, buzzy TV, and Holland's sensibility was closely aligned with the shows it made. Raphael Bob-Waksberg, the creator of the ambitious animated Hollywood satire "BoJack Horseman," which ran on the platform for six seasons, told me, "Cindy to me *was* Netflix." Then, in 2020, Sarandos promoted Bajaria into the new role of global head of television, giving her oversight of all TV programming both in the United States and abroad. At the same time, he let Holland go.

The shakeup was dissected in the industry trades, perhaps in part because of what Bajaria described to me as the media's appetite for "pitting two women against each other." But her elevation over Holland was most noteworthy as a sign of Netflix's evolving priorities. Bajaria had come up in the industry through the high-volume, high-spectacle world of network-TV movies and miniseries, working for two decades at CBS and at NBC Universal. When she joined Netflix, in 2016, she led the company's first forays into reality TV and brokered deals to rapidly expand the platform's catalogue. In 2019, she began leading non-English TV programming as well. Sarandos told me that in Bajaria and Holland he had "two unbelievably strong candidates" but that he went with the one who he felt best embodied Netflix's "breadth of programming" and increasingly global focus. Netflix won't disclose any internal financial figures, but one former executive told me that the choice was "not shocking" from an economic perspective. "Some of Cindy's shows were tough. People made them for prestige, and for their friends," she said. Bajaria's team more readily embraced the company's new objective, the executive said: not only to compete with cable but to "replace *all* television." Sarandos told me that Netflix's strategy today is to function as "equal parts HBO and FX and AMC and Lifetime and Bravo and E! and Comedy Central." In one conversation, from his seventeen-acre estate in Montecito, he invoked the "golden gut," the idea that for old-school TV executives "things worked because they picked them and they made them work." The role of Netflix's leaders today is entirely different. When you're trying to grow as quickly as possible in as many places as possible, you can't afford to get "bottlenecked behind one sensibility," Sarandos said.

Bajaria started in her new role just as Netflix reached a high point in a decade of galloping growth. In 2020, tens of millions of pandemic viewers were subscribing to the platform to watch frothy hits such as "Tiger King," "The Queen's Gambit," and Shonda Rhimes's Regency-era soap "Bridgerton" (according to Howe, an exemplary gourmet cheeseburger). The platform currently releases to the public only one opaque figure to gauge a show's popularity: hours watched in its first twenty-eight days. Between September and October of 2021, the South Korean battle-royal series "Squid Game" was watched for 1.65 billion hours, making it the company's biggest show ever. Just months later, Netflix made the startling disclosure that it had lost subscribers for the first time in a decade; the day after the announcement, the company's valuation plummeted by more than fifty billion dollars. Hastings and Sarandos blamed the backslide on everything from the war in Ukraine to password sharing. Investor panic mingled with Schadenfreude in Hollywood over the prospect that entertainment's chief disruptor might no longer be indomitable. At a media conference in June, Bajaria said, "It's a good place, to be the underdog."



The subscription numbers recovered in the second half of the year, helped by such releases as the fourth season of the sci-fi smash "Stranger Things." But Netflix's trouble turned out to be a harbinger of wider disturbance in the streaming industry. At other platforms, the summer and fall brought a cascade of layoffs, leadership shufflings, and abrupt cancellations. Streaming companies had spent years scrambling to catch up with the hyper-aggressive strategy that Netflix pioneered, spending lavish sums to nab shows before their competitors, sometimes without even seeing completed pilot scripts. Now, with a recession looming, the industry was undergoing what Matthew Belloni, a founding partner of the industry outlet Puck, gently described to me as "a market correction." According to the entertainment-research firm Ampere Analysis, the number of new scripted series aimed at American adults was down twenty-four per cent among streamers and networks in late 2022 compared with the same period in 2021. In November, Netflix introduced a lower-cost subscription tier with ads, a move it had long resisted, and it will reportedly soon start cracking down on password sharing. Its projected content budget for 2023 is the same as last year's—seventeen billion dollars, a colossal sum, but, by the warped standards that the company set for itself, anything that isn't rapid expansion looks like stagnation.

One challenge is the seeming saturation of the American streaming market. Just a few years ago, Netflix was effectively what one industry analyst described to me as "the only game in town." Now, with the ascendancy of, among other platforms, Prime Video, Peacock, Paramount+, and the formidable triple "bundle" of Disney+, ESPN+, and Hulu (not to mention competition from the likes of YouTube and TikTok), it is harder to keep viewers engaged. According to a recent study by the streaming-analytics firm Antenna, only fifty-five per cent of U.S. Netflix subscribers who signed up last January stayed on for more than six months. Netflix does not, like some of its competitors, have a deep back catalogue of globally popular intellectual property, and companies once willing to license their content now withhold it for their own streaming services. Nor does Netflix have another lucrative business arm, the way Apple or Amazon does, to offset spending on content. What it does have is a head start in the large swaths of the globe that are still dominated by traditional "linear TV." Netflix made its first foreign-language original, the Mexican *fútbol* satire "Club de Cuervos," in 2015. Two years later, Hastings acknowledged that "the big growth" for the company lay abroad. Netflix today offers streaming services in more than a hundred and ninety countries. According to one study, in the third quarter of 2022 alone it released more than a thousand episodes of original streaming television globally—at least five times the number of any other streaming service. Almost seventy per cent of Netflix's two hundred and twenty-three million subscriptions now come from outside the U.S. and Canada.

"This last one may not look like much, but just see what it'll do to your back after seven or eight hours a day."

The company deemed Bajaria suited to guide this repositioning in part because, as Hastings put it, she is the "most global television executive." The London-born daughter of Indian parents from East Africa, Bajaria can juggle the relatively parochial workings of Hollywood and the more ambassadorial demands of representing Netflix abroad. She lunches regularly at the Tower Bar, the industry clubhouse in West Hollywood where you go if you want to be seen making a TV deal. But Hastings told me that she impressed him, during a business trip to Delhi early in her tenure, by insisting that they leave the grounds of the five-star Imperial Hotel to eat at a "hole-in-the-wall that had epic food."

During Bajaria's thirty-six hours in Mexico City, her meals were more of the white-tablecloth variety. She had breakfast at the Four Seasons with Carolina Rivera, a Mexican telenovela writer who worked on "Jane the Virgin" for the CW and now creates Spanish-language content for Netflix, and dinner at an upscale vegan-friendly restaurant with the five female leads of "Las Viudas de los Jueves" ("The Thursday Widows"), which was described to me as a Mexican "Desperate Housewives." On her only full day in town, she delivered the keynote address at a Netflix-sponsored UNESCO luncheon on the grounds of Los Pinos, the former Presidential palace. Her private car rolled up to the turquoise gate at noon. Inside, the dangling fronds of massive Montezuma cypresses hid a sunken patio from view, but there was no missing the entrance, which was marked by a huge sign emblazoned with a scarlet "N." In her address, which lasted exactly three minutes, Bajaria repeated a phrase that has become boilerplate for a globalized Netflix: "We truly believe that great storytelling can come from anywhere and be loved everywhere."

In recent years, Netflix has spent gargantuan sums to lock some of the biggest American showrunners into exclusive or semi-exclusive "over-all" content-making deals. In 2017, Shonda Rhimes left ABC, where she'd made runaway hits such as "Grey's Anatomy" and "Scandal," and signed a contract with Netflix for a reported hundred million dollars. The following year, the company paid a rumored three hundred million for a deal with Ryan Murphy, the prolific creator behind "Glee" and "American Horror Story." When Bajaria took over, in 2020, she started an over-alls department as a kind of concierge service for this marquee talent. Rhimes told me, "I know this sounds fake, because I've never, ever heard of this in television. I've had the easiest time in the world at Netflix." During travels in Europe over the summer, Bajaria made a special stop in Budapest to see Shawn Levy, who directed the "Night at the Museum" movies before his production company, 21 Laps, brought "Stranger Things" to Netflix, in 2015. Now, under an over-all deal worth nine figures, he was filming a miniseries adaptation of Anthony Doerr's best-selling novel "All the Light We Cannot See," about a blind French teen-ager during the Second World War. Bajaria told me that relationship management is "half my job, if not more," adding, "Obviously, we have a big, big relationship with Shawn."

One evening, in the lobby bar at the Budapest Four Seasons, she and Levy recalled meeting for the first time, shortly after Bajaria's promotion.

"There was a simpatico idea that things could be really good *and* commercial," Levy said. "You didn't care about 'taste clusters,' or whatever the Netflix lingo is. Is that still a thing?" He was referring to a onetime company method of sorting subscribers into categories based on their viewing preferences.

"I feel like when I started it was still a thing," Bajaria said. "But no."

"It's such a delightfully absurd lexicon," Levy replied. Slim and excitable, he was sipping a Bloody Mary and sitting, in the universal pose of the male American schmoozer, with one sneaker-clad foot crossed over the opposite knee. "You were, like, 'Just explode the idea of what your mandate is,'" he said, adding, "You were, like, 'Give me misanthropic antihero one-hour drama, give me aspirational action-adventure!'"

The next morning, Levy was filming an evacuation scene at the old Budapest stock exchange, a fading Beaux-Arts building that had been made over to look like the Gare du Nord, in Paris. Bajaria sat in a director's chair, watching on a monitor as two of the series' stars, Aria Mia Loberti and Mark Ruffalo, ran among a crowd of extras in fur overcoats down the building's main marble staircase. Later, she and Levy posed for a photo on a battered steamer trunk in front of a newsstand stocked with fake back issues of *La Mode Chic*. For better or worse, some network executives are notorious for providing reams of notes on showrunners' works in progress. The feedback I heard Bajaria give was unfailingly broad and boosterish. In private, Levy showed her a recently filmed scene on his laptop. Listening to them talk about it afterward provided few clues as to its contents.

"It's big and beautiful, and has a big emotional score, and an emotional story, and a great cast," Bajaria said.

"My hope is that it will get platformed to the world in a loud way," Levy replied.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Meteorologist says, "For your local weather,
here is a quick peek out your window."
You look: you see houses leaning against one another for support—
as if the whole world is falling apart.
On a front porch, a woman is breastfeeding a newborn and
you know a pointless war rages on, on the other side of the river.
You see that poor beggar family with a little boy
walking along the winter beach. You see the retired general
going to the bar for his morning coffee.
Using your binoculars, you see through the window
of the watering hole a shivering couple huddled together
at a table in the corner. Two tables away, the circus performers
enjoying a morning pick-me-up, but you don't see the weather.

—*Clarence Major*

In 2017, Netflix marked its territory in Hollywood with the opening of a new company headquarters, the Icon Building, on what was once the original Warner Bros. studio lot. One morning, I passed under the lobby's eighty-foot-long video screen to the elevator banks, where a massive statue of Young-hee, the murderous doll from "Squid Game," loomed. Upstairs, Bajaria showed me her office, which sat between those of Sarandos and Scott Stuber, her counterpart in the platform's newer film division. It was a sunny space decorated with a large figurine of the Hindu god Ganesha and, as an homage to both Bajaria's itinerant job and her multinational upbringing, seven clocks set to the local times of cities across the globe.

Bajaria's parents, Rekha and Ramesh, met and married in Kenya but moved to the U.K. for her birth, in 1970, so that she would have what they considered a more desirable passport. "We wanted her to have that birthright," Rekha told me. After living briefly in Zambia and then back in England for the birth of Bajaria's brother, Rekha and Ramesh moved to Los Angeles, where they started a successful car-wash company. They took their baby son but left Bajaria, then five, in London, with her grandparents, to continue school while they settled in. Because of visa issues, she didn't reunite with the family in L.A. until three years later. Bajaria recalled, "I was seeing these people who were my parents but who I did not know, and there were no Indians here." TV became a window onto an unfamiliar culture. Each week, the family would gather to watch "Dallas" and "Dynasty." Bajaria recalled that within a couple of months she had lost her British accent.

Rekha and Ramesh liked to entertain, throwing parties with bands playing Hindi music into the early morning. But they tried—unsuccessfully—to prevent their daughter from dating or even playing volleyball. "My dad said, 'Those shorts are too short,'" Bajaria told me. When she was in high school, she baffled her elders with the announcement that she wanted to work in entertainment. "Even later, when I was on the cover of *Fortune*, one of my Indian aunties was, like, 'We're proud of you, Bela, but it's so *surprising*,'" Bajaria said. (A print in her office, by the artist Maria Qamar, shows a bindi-adorned woman asking, "Has anyone seen my sharam?!"—the Hindi word for shame.) During college at Pepperdine University, in Malibu, she signed up for Miss India California, a pageant for women of Indian descent, at the suggestion of a family friend. For the talent portion of the competition, she learned a dance from the classic Bollywood film "Guide." Rekha told me the pageant organizers said that at first Bajaria had "two left feet," but she won the title, followed by Miss India U.S.A. and, finally, in 1991, Miss India Universe. (She took time off from school, and later graduated from the California State University in Long Beach.)

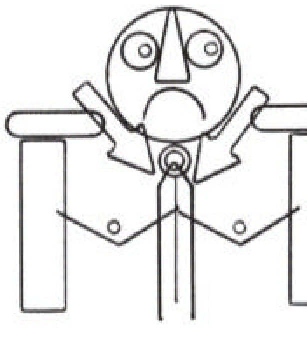
"I have this theory that I won because I didn't see it as a step in my career," Bajaria told me. "I didn't want to be an actress. I didn't need it." After her victory, a Bollywood studio offered her an acting contract. She instead bought a copy of the Hollywood Creative Directory and sent a slew of cover letters to studios inquiring about entry-level jobs. She got two interviews. One, at TriStar Pictures, yielded nothing. During the other, at CBS, she learned that Joan Yee, an executive in the movies-and-miniseries department, had been looking for a new assistant. Bajaria persuaded Yee to take her on for a monthlong trial, and ended up staying in the role for almost two years.

The movies-and-miniseries department churned out dozens of programs a year, including schmaltzy epics, true-crime dramatizations, and the long-running “Hallmark Hall of Fame.” Owing to the “female-skewing” audiences for such fare, it was one of the few corners of network television in which women executives dominated. “It was so rare to work for a woman, let alone a woman of color,” Bajaria said of Yee, who was born in Hong Kong. Another of Bajaria’s superiors at the time recalled her as “strategic and savvy” and very charismatic. In 1997, Bajaria accepted a job offer at Warner Bros. Studios, but she ended up back at CBS, two months later, after a departing executive recommended that she take his place. She was twenty-seven. The superior told me, “I don’t think anybody ever got promoted out of the assistant pool before.”

Bajaria found her first major success, in 1999, with a Joan of Arc miniseries starring Leelee Sobieski, which was made on a tight schedule, over one winter, and was nominated for thirteen Emmys. In 2002, she was promoted to run the movies-and-miniseries department. Many people who have worked with Bajaria described her uncommon decisiveness. Creative decision-making can be agonizing, especially when many millions of dollars are on the line. Bajaria does not overthink. A colleague in movies and miniseries, who asked not to be named, said, “The thing is, she’s not an intellectual. She’s smart. There’s a difference. She’s bold, and that’s what it takes. I don’t have that gene, and that’s why my career only went so far. You need to be able to say yes and keep forging ahead.”

TV networks are the steamships of entertainment, hulking and difficult to redirect. Many of Bajaria’s older colleagues at CBS had worked their way through the ranks and then sat in plum positions for decades. “The men around me kept telling me, Your job is *so* great,” she recalled. But she saw that even her department’s biggest programs, including a three-hour Elvis “television event” starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers, had trouble competing with addictive new network series such as “Desperate Housewives,” and that young cable companies were eager for new original programming. In 2006, she persuaded the president and C.E.O. of CBS, Leslie Moonves, and the president of CBS Entertainment, Nancy Tellem, to let her launch an in-house cable studio, a production hub operating under the umbrella of CBS but able to license to other outlets. The company didn’t offer much support, and most of her projects languished in development, but the job led to an offer, in 2011, to revive the in-house studio at NBC Entertainment, under the name Universal Television. Bob Greenblatt, the chairman of NBC Entertainment at the time, told me, “I knew she was immensely capable of volume. She also had this ingratiating way about her, where people were drawn to her.”

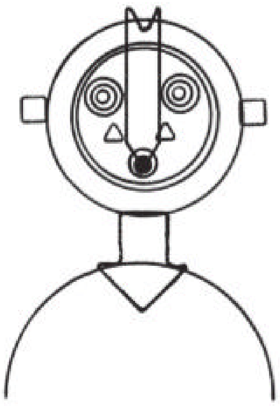
NBC Universal had recently found success with the workplace sitcoms “Parks and Recreation” and the American version of “The Office,” and they’d signed several creators from those shows, including Mindy Kaling, to over-all deals. In 2011, Kaling and Bajaria brought the network a script for a new comedy about a high-achieving but lovelorn Indian-American doctor. When NBC passed, Bajaria promptly took it to Fox, where it became “The Mindy Project.” The next year, she pulled a similar move with Michael Schur, the co-creator of “Parks and Recreation,” and the pitch for “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” a police-station comedy. Kaling told me, of Bajaria, “It was a little strange to be pitching outside of the network. All of us were really excited that she was so open-minded about where a show could go.”



Another market for new series was budding in the realm of streaming. Hulu put out its first original program, a news digest called “The Morning After,” in 2011. The same year, at the end of a licensing meeting with MRC Entertainment, an executive mentioned to Sarandos that he was shopping around a drama titled “House of Cards,” with David Fincher attached to direct. HBO had already put in an offer, but Sarandos and Holland beat the studio out by buying two seasons up front, without a pilot—an extraordinary commitment at the time—for an astronomical hundred million dollars. While the series was in development, Netflix secured the rights to “Lilyhammer,” a crime comedy starring Steven Van Zandt, to serve as what Holland describes in “It’s Not TV” as “the canary in the coal mine,” allowing the company to practice coördinating a show launch across multiple territories. Pioneering the “binge” model, Netflix put out all eight episodes at once. In the following years, Bajaria sold a string of successful comedies to streamers, including “The Mindy Project,” to Hulu, after it was cancelled by Fox, and “Master of None”—a show from Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang that Schur executive-produced—to Netflix. In 2014, when NBC balked at “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” a mildly edgy sitcom about a cult escapee, Bajaria went back to Netflix. Tina Fey, who co-created “Kimmy Schmidt,” told me, “I think that maneuver saved that show.”

Bajaria said that her knack for selling projects to other companies may ultimately have worked against her at Universal. “I knew when we won Golden Globes for ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine,’ it was embarrassing to us, because NBC should have bought that show,” she said. On the Friday before Memorial Day, in 2016, Greenblatt called Bajaria into his office and informed her that he was letting her go. Greenblatt told me, “It was just moving bigger pieces around. She had sort of already reached the top of that place in the company.” Bajaria found the firing humiliating. “It’s this reckoning with your identity,” she said. “I came up from a family of car washes, and Universal was my car wash, you know? I hired everybody there, I created the culture.” One executive she knew told her to see the dismissal as a rite of passage. “He said, ‘You’re actually somebody in this business *because* you got fired,’ ” Bajaria told me. The week after Labor Day, she received a call from Sarandos, asking her to come to Netflix’s L.A. headquarters for a meeting.

A much touted tenet of Netflix company culture is “radical candor.” In that spirit, many of Bajaria’s content meetings incorporate discussion of “learnings,” including lessons gleaned from shows that have failed. One afternoon at the L.A. offices, she gathered with a flock of young development executives from the unscripted department, which handles reality and documentary series. Bajaria ran it during her first three years at Netflix. “It’s *always* fun to see this crew,” she said.



A minute later, a picture of the cast of “Dated and Related” appeared on a screen at the front of the room, and Bajaria playfully groaned. The show was a twist on the “villa reality” format of series such as “Love Island”: six pairs of single siblings cavorting in a tropical locale while serving as each other’s wingmen.

“The idea was, Who knows you better than family?” the show’s lead executive, Sean Hancock, said. “It makes sense on paper. We thought it would be deliciously awkward.” In practice, though, to many people the name “Dated and Related” suggested a show about incest.

“They sleep in the same room!” Bajaria said. She had not stood in the way of the project, but she’d questioned the choice of title at a meeting before it had gone into production. This put her in the convenient position of now being able to good-naturedly remind them of her own better judgment. At one Netflix foreign office, an executive telling Bajaria about a flop had seemed mortified. Hancock was more sanguine.

“Look, I fought very hard for the title,” he said. “We wanted to lean in to cheeky and loud.”

“Yeah, the title. I was not a fan,” Bajaria said with a laugh.

The staff moved on to presenting upcoming shows, and a department manager described Netflix’s “first foray into the survival-competition space”—“Outlast,” set in the Alaskan tundra.

“So I watched this,” Bajaria said. “With ‘Survivor,’ there’s a beautiful island and some ocean and pretty people. This was *interesting*, because I was, like, it’s cold and gray. And every person has a hat on?” She moved her manicured hands in circles around her face, as if trying to conjure up a reason the show should exist.

The manager replied, “Although they might not look as good in bikinis, the cast is *amazing*.”

Talk moved on to franchise opportunities, including a reality-show spinoff of “Squid Game,” which an executive from London explained would feature four hundred and fifty-six contestants, as in the original, and a $4.56 million prize. “There’s life-or-death decisions, but we want to do all that without, you know, the death,” she said.

“On this show they can’t kill anybody?” Bajaria quipped.

“That’s for Season 2,” Hancock replied.

Under Bajaria, the unscripted department made the popular “Queer Eye” reboot and a flurry of dating shows and novelty cooking competitions. But it was her parallel responsibilities, as the head of licensing and co-production, that allowed her to amass power within the company. Executives liked to boast of “the Netflix bump,” the platform’s ability to bring new audiences to other companies’ shows by streaming their archives. Series such as “The Office” and “Breaking Bad” had enjoyed spikes in ratings on their home channels after Netflix released the old seasons for commercial-free binge-watching. Through what the company called co-licensing, Netflix could get in on such deals earlier in a project’s formation, offering financing in exchange for the rights to première it internationally. In so doing, they could rebrand shows such as NBC’s “Good Girls” and the CW’s “Riverdale” as Netflix originals abroad. This model also allowed Bajaria to continue scooping up shows that networks had discarded. When Lifetime cancelled Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble’s stalker thriller “You” after one season, Bajaria turned it from a co-licensed series to a Netflix original. In Season 3, it hit the platform’s Top Ten in ninety-four countries.

Sarandos has said that Netflix is oriented around “saying yes in a town that’s built to say no.” In licensing, Bajaria occasionally followed this edict by saying yes to content that others within Netflix had already rejected. In 2017, Holland’s department passed on a pilot that the CW had commissioned but not picked up, a comedy called “Insatiable,” about a vengeful, formerly plus-size beauty queen. Shortly thereafter, Bajaria bought it—since there was a pilot, it could technically count as a licensing arrangement. The show aimed for John Watersesque camp but was for the most part clumsily provocative. Critics panned it, but it ran for two seasons, and Bajaria told me, “It did really well for us.” In a piece in the *Hollywood Reporter*, an anonymous producer said that “Insatiable” marked a “Walmart-ization” of Netflix as the platform increasingly prioritized voracious acquisition over curatorial discernment.

The most successful showrunners I spoke to said that Bajaria backed their vision, even if she wasn’t personally invested in the material. Michael Schur recalled that, when he approached her, years ago, with an idea for a miniseries adaptation of David Foster Wallace’s notoriously dense thousand-page novel “Infinite Jest,” she said, “I’ve never read the book, and I’ll tell you right now I’m not going to read the book. But if this is the thing you’re passionate about then let’s figure out how to do it.” (Schur optioned the book, but nothing came of it.) Shawn Levy told me that the only input from Bajaria on “All the Light We Cannot See” regarded the casting of Aria Mia Loberti, an unknown visually impaired actress. Bajaria called Levy for a “gut check,” she said. “I wanted to make sure—was he feeling *pressure*, or did he think creatively it would be better?” But she assured him she would back his choice.

Bajaria’s loyalty to certain creators is paired with an ethos of extreme deference to the viewer. When I brought up a 2021 Dave Chappelle standup special whose jokes about transgender people prompted a walkout by members of Netflix’s staff, Bajaria said, “Our audience can decide whether they want to click Play or not.” She seemed perplexed that many critics had been disgusted by the slog of pornographic violence in Ryan Murphy’s recent Jeffrey Dahmer bio-pic, “Monster.” Of the many scathing reviews, she said, “Are you just trying to be contrary?” The series made the Top Ten list in ninety-two countries. In November, Netflix announced two additional seasons centered upon other serial killers.

I asked Bajaria about her own favorite shows, but she was noncommittal. “I mean, I’m a fan of TV. I work in TV. I watch everybody’s things,” she said, adding, “People have very different tastes, and I have no disdain for whatever those things are. What is quality? What is good versus not? That’s all subjective. I just want to super-serve the audience.”

She was less guarded about her proclivities during a private jet ride to the Netflix offices in Madrid. A company publicist had intended to be present during all of our travels, but she had tested positive for COVID, so Bajaria and I were alone on the plane. A flight attendant wearing a small black beret offered us hot towels, and Bajaria perused the wine list.

“You don’t have Sauvignon Blanc?” she said. “Do you have anything like a Sauvignon Blanc? Maybe a rosé?”

The flight attendant suggested a very dry Chardonnay, and Bajaria wrinkled her nose. “O.K., I’ll try it,” she said. Then she turned to me and added, “If you write this part, you have to say that I drank the Sauvignon Blanc, because it *cannot* be my reputation that I drank Chardonnay.”

Netflix’s first European production hub opened in 2019, in Tres Cantos, on the outskirts of Madrid, with five soundstages. This past year, it added five more and a postproduction studio with thirty editing rooms. The morning after our flight to Madrid, Bajaria toured the facilities, which are part of a larger complex called Madrid Content City. She was heading to the Rome office later that day, so she arrived with her rolling suitcase and a Louis Vuitton tote bag monogrammed with the bright-blue initials “BB.” The low-slung concrete building smelled like fresh paint. Pilot scripts from around the world decorated the walls. A studio manager told Bajaria, “We have tested the latency from here to Turkey, and basically we can get all Europe connecting with no issues.”

Some Netflix shows made abroad are clearly angling to travel widely. The recent German sci-fi series “1899,” about a group of passengers on a nineteenth-century steamship, features a U.N. summit’s worth of international actors, all speaking in their native tongues but often miraculously able to understand one another—except when the plot requires that they don’t. The series was shot outside Berlin on a revolving virtual production stage that can generate photorealistic 3-D backdrops of locations anywhere. TV executives have always sought shows that appeal to all four core demographic “quadrants”—male and female, under and over twenty-five. The globalized mélange of “1899” feels reverse-engineered to capture viewers in all four corners of the Earth. But, as Bajaria herself acknowledged, making international hits isn’t a science; she told me that the success of “Squid Game” across the world came as a complete surprise. Just after New Year’s, the “1899” showrunners announced “with a heavy heart” that their series had been cancelled.

Most of the local-language originals that the platform produces are smaller programs that one analyst described as a “retention tool,” to keep viewers on Netflix after they’ve watched (or not watched) the latest splashy global show. In Japan, subscribers may be served “Narcos” but also dozens of anime series; in Scandinavia, “Ozark” but also plenty of Nordic noir. In India, there are original programs not only in Hindi and English but in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali. In Tres Cantos, the Madrid team discussed a new reality show called “Lady Tamara,” following a *marquesa* whom the New York *Post* has described as a Spanish Kim Kardashian. It was released last August and reached the Top Ten only in Spain, which Netflix says is by design. Most viewers elsewhere are probably unaware that it exists, because the platform’s personalized algorithm won’t serve it to them. Instead, the company will simply make similar reality shows in other territories. The Madrid team mused about which Netflix dating franchise would better translate to a Spanish audience, “Love Is Blind,” about couples who get engaged sight unseen, or “The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On.” The latter already had a foreign remake under way in Johannesburg, one of Netflix’s first nodes of production in Africa. “Elite,” a “Gossip Girl”-style Spanish teen soap, was being remade in India, set in a private school in New Delhi, albeit with “less sex,” as Bajaria joked.

Netflix executives repeatedly emphasized to me the work that they do to bolster entertainment “ecosystems” abroad. In Tres Cantos, Bajaria met, seemingly for my benefit, with a group of aspiring Spanish screenwriters and filmmakers from the company’s “Grow

PIZZA
LUKE HEALY

Creative" initiative, a program to "up-level local talent pools," including crew workers, many of whom are then put to use staffing Netflix productions. Dean Garfield, the company's Jamaican-born, Singapore-based V.P. of public policy, told me that when cultivating relationships with new countries he promises that Netflix will foster both economic growth and "a deeper affinity for their culture around the world." When this pitch doesn't work, Netflix has sometimes been able to pay its way to coöperation. In 2020, after years of tense diplomacy with France's proudly insular entertainment industry, including a standoff with the Cannes Film Festival, the company achieved a delicate détente by committing to investing heavily in what a press release called "French series and films for French people." Netflix is now one of the country's largest producers of content, releasing about twenty films and series a year, though perhaps its best-known program set in France is still Darren Star's American ex-pat rom-com "Emily in Paris," which is about as French as a Starbucks croissant. An indigenous streaming platform called Salto, founded by France's major TV broadcasters in 2020, failed to take off with viewers and is reportedly in danger of being sold off or shut down.

Outside of Europe and North America, the ARPU—average revenue per user—tends to be lower. A subscription in India costs as little as a hundred and forty-nine rupees, or a dollar eighty-one. But it is relatively cheap to make shows abroad, even in wealthier countries. A single episode of the most recent season of "Stranger Things" is rumored to have cost Netflix thirty million dollars. The entirety of "Squid Game" reportedly cost only $21.4 million. As other major players in the so-called American streaming wars seek new revenue streams, they are increasingly following Netflix overseas. Apple TV+ will soon début its first French production, the thriller series "Liaison," starring Vincent Cassel, one of the country's biggest stars. In Madrid, I saw a billboard for "García!," an HBO Max spy series that was released this past fall. But an industry leader told me that the ultimate payoff of this strategy is far from certain for any streaming company. " 'Building a global brand' is a topic sentence in their meetings right now, but the same constraints that affect programming locally are affecting them globally," he said. "Their resources are contracting. And the jury is still out."

One former Netflix executive said that the company's increasing international focus has frustrated some L.A. staffers. "The U.S. viewer is more valuable than anywhere else, but there was this rush to get ourselves all over the world," the executive said. "They let the U.S. languish a little bit." American creators who have commercial hits get to take another "fresh swing." But I spoke to several showrunners of more niche series who said that the company became less accommodating of their projects as the platform swelled in scope.

Raphael Bob-Waksberg recalled that when "BoJack Horseman" débuted, in 2014, Netflix promoted it generously. The series skewered the cynical self-justifications of Hollywood types, and there was something poetic about it airing on the upstart platform seeking to transform the industry. "I had Netflix team pride," Bob-Waksberg said, adding, "I cannot imagine another time or place where 'BoJack' got the acclaim and number of seasons that it did." At some point, though, he noticed that the platform was auto-skipping the credits of the show. In a product meeting, he raised an objection, and an executive explained that doing so helped viewers breeze through episodes. As Bob-Waksberg recalled it, he joked that they might as well simply eliminate the story line of Princess Carolyn, one of five protagonists, to which the executive replied, "Who is Princess Carolyn?" Bob-Waksberg told me, "That's when I knew it was the beginning of the end." He produced another excellent animated show for Netflix, Lisa Hanawalt's "Tuca & Bertie," but the company cancelled it after one season.

For projects afforded the time, TV's serialized format can have distinct creative advantages. Ensembles gel from one season to the next. Standout supporting actors get written into starring roles. Some of the most beloved TV shows were slow to catch on with audiences. "Seinfeld" was considered a failure in its first season. "The Wire" lagged in Season 2 before yielding twelve of the finest episodes of television ever made, in Season 3. One creator described Netflix's initial attitude toward original programs as, "Maybe people won't find it Season 1. But by Season 3? We just want to be proud of the things in the library." According to Bajaria, though, the company today has little patience for shows that don't perform immediately. The Netflix algorithm insures that content "is served right up to you in front of your face, so it's not like you can't find it," she told me. "At some point it's, like, Is the budget better spent on a next new thing?"

Bajaria pointed out that TV shows

"How come we don't start plagues anymore? Are we one of those boring couples?"

have always sunk or swum with the ratings. Michael Schur told me that what feels different in streaming is the capriciousness of the platforms' data-driven demands. "The sands are shifting all the time," he said. "It's very hard to learn what the rules are." He said that Netflix shared no audience figures with him for "Master of None" and called this "the slipperiest move in history," given how closely the numbers determine a show's fate. (According to Netflix, showrunners today are provided "additional information.") Another creator, who wished to remain anonymous, had a well-received series on Netflix for multiple seasons before it went "on the bubble"—an industry term for a limbo period during which the company decides whether to renew. The creator recalled that the series was ultimately cancelled without a clear explanation. (Bajaria told me, of the company's approach to cancellations, "If it was successful, or if it had enough of an audience, we would be the first ones to renew it.") "It kind of felt like the tech side was the cart that was leading the horse," the creator said, adding, "None of these individual shows are the product they are selling. They are just selling more Netflix."

The company does still occasionally green-light more esoteric projects, with what Bajaria described as "right-sized budgets" reflecting their marginal viewerships. Among them are two of my favorite recent Netflix offerings, Tim Robinson's sketch series "I Think You Should Leave" and "Derry Girls," a coming-of-age comedy set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Sarandos said that one of his own favorite Netflix originals of all time is the 2016 meta-sitcom "Lady Dynamite," from the cult comedian Maria Bamford, which the company cancelled after two seasons. He repeated the common industry adage that comedies don't travel well. "As human beings we likely cry at the exact same things, but we all laugh at something totally different," he said. In the early two-thousands, the author and entrepreneur Chris Anderson coined the term "the long tail" to describe the idea that the Internet was fracturing what was once a single mass culture into a "mass of niches," so that the future of the entertainment industry lay not in producing megahits that please everyone but in catering to many distinct groups of avid fans. Sarandos told me that Netflix has jettisoned that thinking. "There was this misnomer about the Internet all along," he said. "There is no long tail without the big head."

One showrunner I spoke to described the current streaming environment by borrowing an infamous William Goldman comment about Hollywood, that "nobody knows anything" about what's going to work. When I began following Bajaria, last summer, Netflix was still on the back foot, particularly in the trade press. "People love to click on stories about us," she said. "Netflix has great S.E.O." She was advising her content teams to tune out the "noise" and the financial pressures and focus instead on what they could control. As she put it, "What we can do is be always audience-centric: Who is this show for? If you like this show, then we're gonna give you this *other* thing you like. If you do that, people are gonna watch the shows, and all of those things will help the stock." Netflix's stock price has not recovered from its springtime slump. But by the end of the year Bajaria was reminding me that three recent series—the new season of "Stranger Things," "Dahmer," and Tim Burton's Addams Family spinoff, "Wednesday"—had become its biggest English-language releases of all time. "Look at the hit rate," she told me. "That's all I'm saying."

One morning during my visit to L.A., I joined Bajaria on a "hiking meeting" along a trail near her home in Studio City. It was a warm day, and she was planning to have lunch at her favorite açai-bowl place before holding a virtual meeting with the Korean content team. She was getting over a head cold and had suggested taking the three-mile loop backward, a less steep route, though she seemed chagrined to be getting a lighter workout. "It's ten per cent easier this way," she said.

Bajaria did not want her home life reported on for this piece. But she was eager to tell me about the teen-age son and two college-age daughters she shares with her husband, Doug Prochilo, and about the fact that Rekha, her mother, cooks dinner for a couple of hundred people at a Hindu temple each week. (Ramesh died in 2000.) Bajaria said that she doesn't socialize much within Hollywood. On the hike, though, a pair of women waved emphatically when they saw Bajaria come around the bend.

"Hi, hi, hi!" Bajaria said.

One of the women remarked that she could see Bajaria's house from the trail's highest point. "I always look down and am, like, 'Hi, Bela!' " she said. "But then I was, like, Is that creepy?"

"No, you can visit my house anytime you want!" Bajaria said. When the women passed, Bajaria explained to me that she knew them from the neighborhood, though both worked in television.

"I guess I do have industry friends," she told me later.

With us on the hike was Jinny Howe, the V.P. of drama series for the U.S. and Canada—and the coiner of "gourmet cheeseburger"—who told Bajaria about an American remake of a South Korean series that her team was developing. In 2019, Netflix partnered with the South Korean production company Studio Dragon to develop a spate of K-dramas. One of them was "Crash Landing on You," a series from Park Ji-eun, a leading South Korean showrunner, about an heiress from Seoul who accidentally paraglides into North Korea and enters into a star-crossed romance with a D.P.R.K. Army officer. Netflix had licensed it for global distribution, but, unlike "Squid Game," or even the South Korean legal drama "Extraordinary Attorney Woo," it did not find a gigantic audience outside of Asia. Howe explained that they were now looking into an American remake.

"And how do we do that?" Bajaria asked. "Because that show was so specifically about North and South Korea."

"So, I think we're gonna see if maybe we can make that divide a little bit more symbolic," Howe said, adding, "We're looking into sci-fi."

"Well, you need a world, right?" Bajaria replied. "Because it is the culture clash of two people who don't fit together but were meant for each other." In the span of an L.A. power walk, they'd freed the show from its pesky geopolitical specificity and sent it somewhere more universal, perhaps literally into space. Bajaria spoke of the unique reach that such a partnership could bring Park. She added, "I do think that's beneficial for creators like her, who are, like, 'Oh, I can do bigger.' " ♦

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THE TOTAL PACKAGE

UPS offers old-fashioned middle-class jobs, so why is a strike looming?

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN

For nearly twenty years, Antoine Andrews has been driving a UPS route in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bay Ridge. When he rings the bell of a house one afternoon, the customer greets him with a fist bump: "What's up, bro?" When he drops off a package at Walgreens, he recognizes an elderly man in the checkout line. The man once worked in a neighborhood bar, and when Andrews used to walk in with a delivery the man always offered him a beer—"On the house!"—which Andrews would decline. As he walks out of Walgreens, he taps the man on the shoulder and says, "Nice to see you!" All day long, Andrews waves to people he knows, and they wave back. He later jokes that, when he's on his route, "I feel like I'm running for office, like I'm on the podium and I'm waving with both hands."

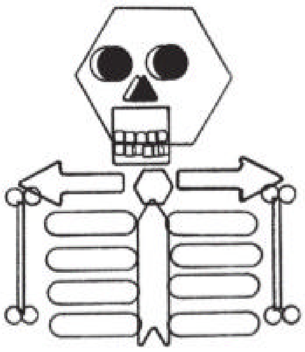
Andrews is forty-six years old, slim and bald, with a salt-and-pepper beard, which is fairly new, because, until 2020, UPS prohibited its drivers from having beards. Before his workday ends, he has to deliver—or attempt to deliver—each of the hundred and forty parcels in the back of his package car. Hour after hour, he does the dance of the UPS driver: driving a block or two, turning off the ignition, unbuckling his seat belt, pulling in his sideview mirror, searching in the back for parcels, climbing out, delivering them to customers. He has delivered just about everything, from dog food to exercise bicycles to fake Christmas trees. Another driver might have grown tired of this job, but Andrews has not. "I take pride in servicing my customers," he told me, "and my customers and I have a great relationship."

Twenty-six years ago, the sort of friendly rapport that he and many UPS drivers have with their customers helped fuel public support for UPS's workers when they went on strike with their union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. At the time, in the summer of 1997, the I.B.T. represented a hundred and eighty-five thousand UPS workers, and their strike was the largest labor action in the U.S. in two decades. Workers stayed out on the picket line for fifteen days, and, in the end, the union declared victory. Today, the I.B.T. represents some three hundred and fifty thousand UPS workers, and the union is threatening to go on strike again when their contract expires, on August 1st. Preparations for a strike have already begun, and Teamsters Local 804, which represents Andrews and the other UPS workers in the New York City area, is helping to lead the way.

The Teamsters' strike threat may seem surprising. UPS drivers have the sort of job that has become increasingly difficult to find, one that does not require a college degree but offers middle-class pay, good health-care benefits, and a pension. Today, a UPS package-car driver starts at twenty-one dollars an hour; a driver with four years on the job can make about forty-two dollars an hour, with the average driver earning ninety-five thousand dollars a year. But, according to many drivers, the job is far more stressful and demanding than a customer might imagine: they describe being subject to extreme time pressures, constant surveillance, and the risk of injury from handling heavy packages. And, of the Teamsters working at UPS, only about forty per cent are drivers. The rest toil inside UPS buildings, mainly as part-time package handlers, for less than half the hourly wage of veteran drivers. "They're the ones that are really getting screwed at this point," Scott Damone, a business agent with Local 804, told me.

Antoine Andrews started his career at UPS as an "inside worker," as they're called, in 1996, and the following year, when UPS workers went on strike, he joined his co-workers on the picket line. He was a "preloader," working four or five hours a day, starting at 3 or

4 A.M. His job required him to take parcels off a conveyor belt and load them into a package car, making certain that every parcel was on the correct shelf, organized by address. He estimates that he would load "a little over a thousand" parcels in a shift. Workers who fell behind would pile the parcels behind the vehicles, but, he recalls, a supervisor would shout, "No stacking! No stacking! Get it in the cars!"



The job gave him nightmares. Sometimes he would dream that he was standing next to the belt, and "the packages are just coming, the volume is just increasing by the second, and packages are just all over the place." The parcels start toppling off the belt and spilling onto the floor. "You're trying to control it, but there's no way of controlling it," he said. "And I would just wake up, like, 'Oh, my God!'"

After he became a driver, in 2001, a different nightmare haunted him. Andrews and his fellow package-car drivers have a certain number of stops they are supposed to make per hour, and if they fall short a supervisor could call them into his office: "Why did you have that gap?" In Andrews's nightmare, he falls asleep in his package car on his lunch break. Five hours elapse before he wakes up, and, when he realizes what has happened, he panics, desperately trying to make up the lost time. Any worker who spends his days racing against a clock might relate to his anxiety: "Trying to catch up—and I can't catch up."

UPS drivers deliver more than five billion parcels a year in the U.S.—an astonishing number that reflects, in part, our national addiction to online shopping. In recent years, UPS's revenue has increased significantly—it was projected to exceed a hundred billion dollars for the first time in 2022—but the company also has much more competition. In New York City, delivery vehicles now clog the streets. Some belong to UPS's traditional competitors, like FedEx, but many display the Amazon logo. Amazon remains UPS's biggest customer—until recently, it accounted for eleven per cent of UPS's business—but it is now delivering many of its own packages. In addition, UPS faces a multitude of new competitors, including drivers who use their personal cars to drop off packages for gig-economy companies like DoorDash. Amit Mehrotra, a managing director and the head of transportation and shipping research at Deutsche Bank, told me, "We've been in an environment in the last two or three years that anybody with spare capacity in a Honda Civic could become a competitor to UPS or FedEx."

Among delivery services, UPS is an anomaly—its workers are covered by a union contract. In fact, the company's contract with the Teamsters is the largest private-sector collective-bargaining agreement in North America, and its unionized workforce has been growing—between 2018 and 2021, UPS added more than fifty thousand Teamsters-represented jobs. Today, UPS workers make up almost thirty per cent of the Teamsters. As Mehrotra puts it, "UPS has been the one oasis in the middle of a vast desert that is declining union membership in our country." (Meanwhile, Amazon is in the midst of laying off more than eighteen thousand workers.)

Last summer, on an earnings call, Mehrotra asked UPS's C.E.O., Carol Tomé, about the upcoming negotiations with the Teamsters. She said that she wants a contract that satisfies the company and the union: "These are great jobs that we value very much. Our goal with the Teamsters is win-win-win." If some three hundred thousand workers walk off the job this summer, the consequences for the company could be severe, with non-union competitors taking advantage of the tumult to steal customers from UPS.

The battle over the next UPS contract will take place at an opportune moment for the Teamsters, as interest in union activism is surging among all sorts of workers, from college teaching assistants to Chipotle burrito-makers to Amazon package handlers. On the earnings call, Tomé noted, "Our workforce is very different than a lot of the workforce that you hear [about] in the media every day that are trying to be organized. They're not paid the way that our Teamsters are paid." If the Teamsters prevail, securing a stronger contract for UPS workers, the agreement could prove to be a powerful recruiting tool for the labor movement—and a crucial asset in the Teamsters' quest to unionize Amazon workers. Sean M. O'Brien, the Teamsters' general president, has said, "We're going to take that contract, and we're going to show the Amazon workers what you get when you join the greatest organization in the world."

The relationship between UPS and the Teamsters is highly unusual, and dates back a century. As the company put it, "We have built UPS into the world's leading package delivery company together." In 1907, an enterprising nineteen-year-old named James E. Casey started a message-delivery service with a friend, taking orders by telephone from a tiny office in the basement of a Seattle saloon. By 1919, Casey had switched his focus to delivering packages, expanded to Oakland, and adopted the name United Parcel Service. The Teamsters had a strong presence in the Bay Area, and Casey invited the union to represent his workers. In "Big Brown: The Untold Story of UPS," Greg Niemann writes that Casey "convinced his partners to extend an invitation," telling them, "I think it's possible to be a good United Parcel Service member and union member at the same time."

In 1930, Casey moved the UPS headquarters to Manhattan. The company's main customers were department stores, like Lord & Taylor, which once had their own delivery operations. In 1937, the Teamsters gave a charter to Local 804 to represent UPS workers in New York, and two years later Local 804 members, enraged that one of their co-workers had been suspended, went on strike. In the summer of 1942, they walked off the job again, to protest the treatment of some three hundred drivers who had been suspended after refusing to work overtime. In 1946, the workers went on strike again, this time for fifty-one days.

The New Yorker published a profile of Casey by Philip Hamburger in 1947. Hamburger revealed how Casey's obsession with packages and his fastidious ways had fuelled the company's growth and shaped its culture. "Over the years, Casey has taken what might look to outsiders like the simple job of handling and delivering packages and turned it into a semi-religious rite," Hamburger wrote. "Drivers, for example, are governed by a series of regulations that could easily be mistaken for the house rules of a Tibetan monastery."

Hamburger introduced readers to UPS's "Manual of Instructions," which directed drivers to be "courteous, well-behaved gentlemen" and not to "walk or drive over the customer's lawn or garden." In the mid-forties, UPS employed some six thousand men, including twenty-eight hundred in New York, and the company had already instituted two of the practices that would help make it an iconic American brand: delivery vehicles were painted brown and its drivers wore brown uniforms. (In addition, Hamburger noted, the drivers at the time wore "a brown cap with a gilt badge bearing a brown eagle and the message 'Safe, Swift, Sure.'")

Recounting the 1946 strike by the city's UPS workers, Hamburger wrote, "Casey kept in close touch with all the developments of the strike, and he even turned up one evening at a meeting of the strikers at the Capitol Hotel and made a characteristically brief speech. 'We've had strikes before. We've won 'em when we've been right, we've lost 'em when we've been wrong,' he said, and then sat down. Casey fancies himself a stern man to deal with, but he is reported to have remarked from time to time during the final negotiations, 'Living costs have gone up; the boys have got to eat.'"

Joe Allen, a former UPS driver in Chicago, details the history of Local 804 in his 2020 book, "The Package King: A Rank-and-File History of UPS." He notes that "relations between Local 804 members and the New York management of UPS have always been stormy," and describes numerous additional strikes, including one in 1962. At the time, Local 804 members were divided over UPS's plan to bring in fifty part-timers and pay them twenty cents less per hour than full-timers to load and unload trucks.

Today, Teamsters Local 804 is among the largest UPS Teamsters locals in the country, representing about eight thousand employees at seventeen buildings in New York City and Westchester County and on Long Island. Antoine Andrews works out of the largest UPS building in Brooklyn, in Canarsie, where he is now not only a package-car driver but also one of Local 804's lead shop stewards. Last July 28th, Andrews and some eighty other UPS drivers showed up to work earlier than usual, before 8 A.M. The drivers, who were wearing their brown shirts and shorts, gathered in a shady spot across the street from their building, chatting with one another over the occasional rumble of the L train. The temperature was already eighty degrees; by midafternoon, the day's "real feel" temperature would climb to ninety-nine.

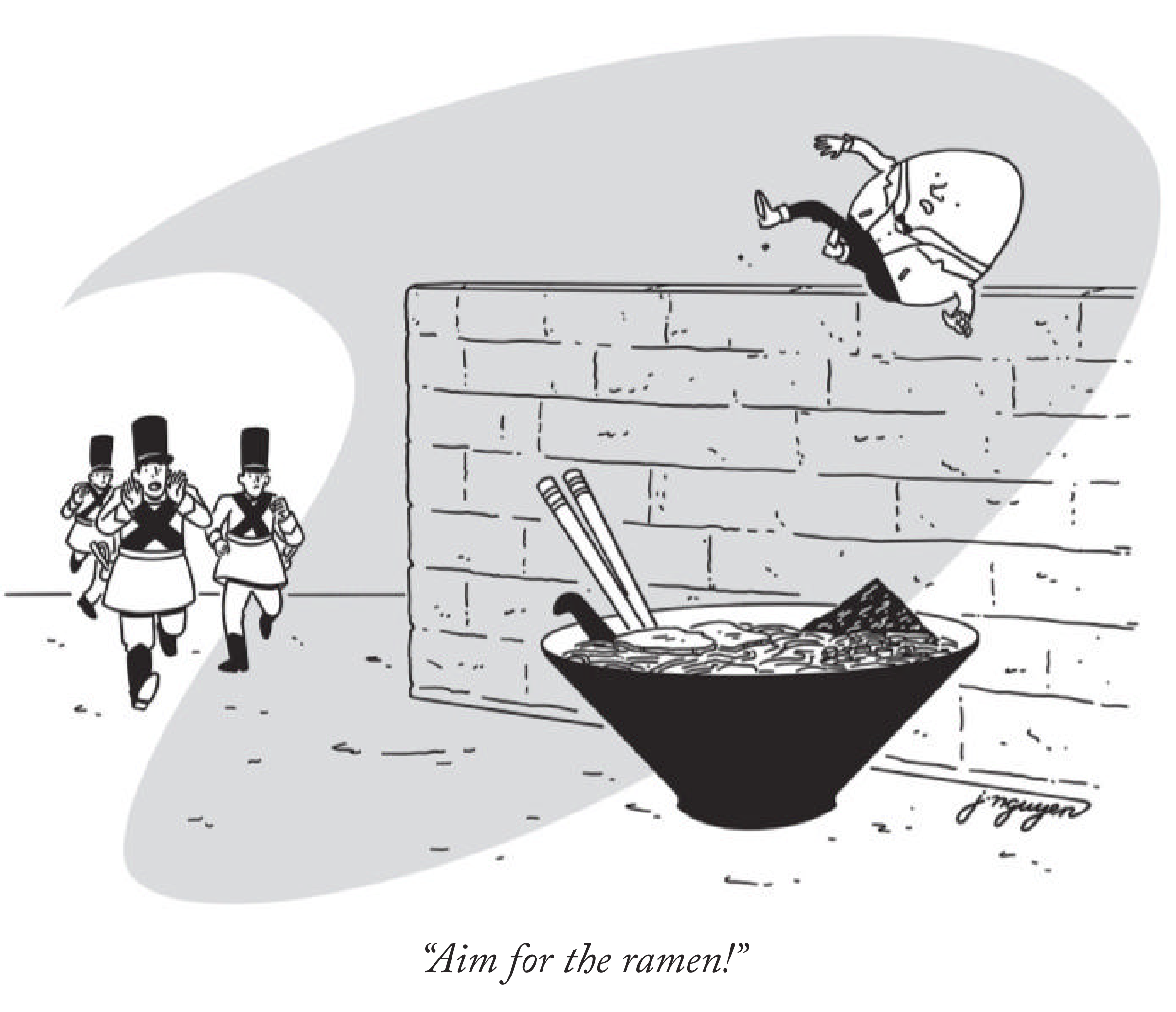
On this morning, Local 804 had organized a rally for its members, and now Andrews stood at the front of the crowd, microphone in hand. "Thank you for being in attendance," he told his co-workers. "It is my honor to introduce 804 president Vinnie Perrone."

Perrone, a burly fifty-eight-year-old, drove a UPS package car for twenty-four years before becoming Local 804's president. "So, what brings us here today? What brings us here today is that I'm sweating!" Perrone said. UPS, he noted, had been posting record profits in 2022, "8.5 per cent over what they made last year during the pandemic. They have a revenue of 24.8 billion dollars in the second quarter. And they are projected—off of your backs, brothers and sisters—to have revenue of over a hundred billion dollars in 2022."

He went on, "That's great news, because they're a solvent company—your jobs are secure. But here's the bad news. A couple weeks ago, a brother, Esteban Chavez, died, twenty-four years old. From the heat!" (Chavez, a UPS driver, was reportedly found unconscious in his package car while on his route near Pasadena. The medical examiner has not yet determined the cause of death.)

Last summer, UPS drivers around the country were using thermometers to check the heat in the back of their vehicles; on social media, photos were circulating of temperature readings above a hundred and twenty degrees. Drivers had been demanding that UPS install air-conditioning in its package cars. The company—which had claimed that A.C. would be "ineffective," because drivers get in and out of their vehicles so often—said that, among other measures, it was "accelerating the installation of fans" in package cars, and providing drivers with water bottles, cooling towels, electrolyte drinks, and freeze pops.

Teamsters leaders have said that UPS's measures are not enough. Perrone mentioned another UPS driver who had recently made the news: "There was a kid in Arizona. I don't know if you guys saw, the video went viral, where he collapsed—on the doorstep." A doorbell camera had caught the moment, and the customer, who was not home at the time, was so disturbed by the footage that he made it public. In the video,



"Aim for the ramen!"

the UPS driver stumbles toward the door with a parcel in hand, then falls to the ground, where he remains for a few moments, legs askew. The incident had occurred on a day when the temperature exceeded a hundred degrees.

"This is what I took from that video," Perrone said. "They indoctrinate you so much that this kid got up after fainting from the heat in Arizona *and rang the customer's bell!*"

(UPS said in a statement to *The New Yorker*, "We have strong reasons to believe that this employee was not properly rested and hydrated prior to work that day and there may have been extenuating circumstances which resulted in the collapse." In addition, the company said, "While there has recently been media attention on heat issues, we have always been faced with operating on hot days, especially in warmer climates. We believe that by training our people to be prepared—and by providing ample resources for support and hydration—we can continue to keep them safe.")

Perrone told the crowd of drivers, "Today, people are going to say, 'It's a nice day.' Yeah, it's a nice day. But your package cars are still going to be way over a hundred degrees." He talked about supervisors who tell drivers to find a "shady area," or a "cooling station." "But the next day, what do they do? 'Oh, you had a gap in time.' What do they do? They call you in the office and ask you, 'What happened?'" he said. "Do not kill yourselves over this company when to them you are nothing more than a hand truck."

Perrone handed the microphone back to Andrews. "I know some of you guys start at eight-thirty-five—just be sure to get in before then. I'll make this short and sweet," Andrews said. "Working with this company as a driver for twenty years, every single summer in the extreme heat, we all know the question from the customer: 'Do you have A.C. in the vehicle?' Right? Obviously, the answer is no. And the same response would be from the customer: 'Well, that's a shame. UPS makes tons of money.' And they're a hundred per cent right."

He announced a moment of silence "for our brother Chavez." Andrews bowed his head, and his fellow-drivers joined him. For a few seconds, the crowd was silent.

Andrews did not permit the silence to last too long. "Thank you," he said, lifting his head. The drivers gathered for a group photo, and soon afterward they hustled off to work, a blur of brown uniforms crossing Foster Avenue.

There is a slogan on the wall of Local 804 headquarters: "Home of Ron Carey." Carey started as a UPS driver in Queens in the mid-fifties, then went on to be elected president of Local 804, in 1967. In Steven Brill's "The Teamsters" (1978), his seminal book about the union, Brill devotes an entire chapter to Carey, depicting him as an honest reformer, the antithesis of many of the men then wielding power within the union. (Its longtime leader Jimmy Hoffa, known for his clout and Mob connections, served time in federal prison for jury tampering, wire fraud, and other crimes.) In 1988, the Justice Department brought a racketeering lawsuit against the Teamsters, in an attempt to stamp out the Mob's influence, and in 1991 the union held its first democratic elections for its leaders. Carey won, defeating five men, including Hoffa's son, James P. Hoffa. When Carey took over, he got rid of the union's private jet and cut his own salary from two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to a hundred and fifty thousand.

On August 4, 1997, four days after the Teamsters' contract with UPS expired, Carey led the company's workers in their first national strike. (By then, Jim Casey was no longer leading UPS. He died in 1983, at the age of ninety-five.) UPS's increasing reliance on part-time employees to work as package handlers had become one of the union's main issues; Carey decried these roles as "part-time throwaway low-wage jobs." The strike halted UPS's operations. Peter Jennings, of ABC News, declared it "the most dramatic confrontation between industry and organized labor in two decades." Airline pilots and autoworkers, as well as Senator Paul Wellstone and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, showed up at UPS workers' rallies. On the picket line outside the UPS hub in Maspeth, Queens, John Richiusa, a package-car driver, told an interviewer, "There's enough money to share, and we're going to make them share it."

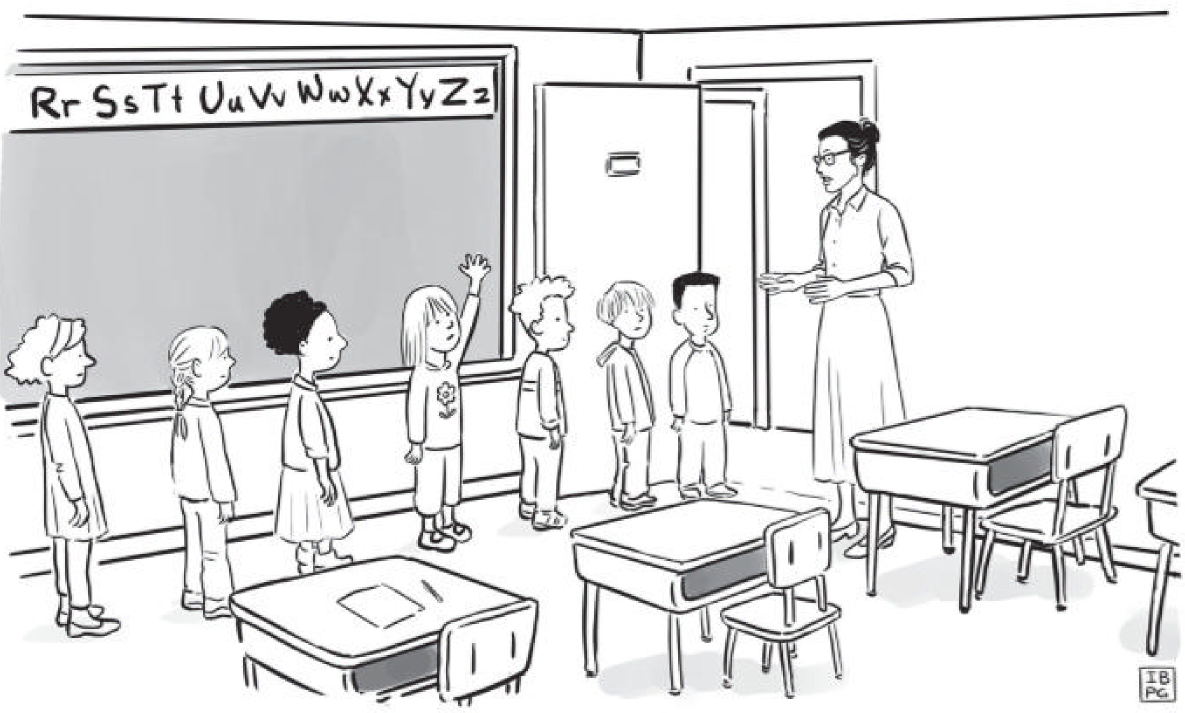
The Teamsters cast their strike not only as a battle against their employer but as a fight for decent jobs for all Americans. Their slogan was "Part-Time America Won't Work." Polls showed that a majority of the public supported the workers, and, in this P.R. battle, UPS found itself in a bind. "Rhetorically, it would have been easier for UPS to vilify the workers and to argue that they were greedy," Deepa Kumar writes in her book "Outside the Box," an analysis of media coverage of the strike. But "UPS could not do this, because the drivers are its public face."

By the time the strike ended, the Teamsters had won significant raises and ten thousand full-time jobs. Richiusa recalled, "When we came back after the strike, they were applauding us in the street"—along Queens Boulevard—"and that's not hyperbole. Because they know how hard we work. They see us covered in sweat, with salt lines striping our shirts."

At Local 804, workers' euphoria did not last long. Carey lost his position shortly afterward, amid a scandal related to the financing of his reëlection campaign, and James P. Hoffa became president of the I.B.T. He held the position for twenty-three years. In 2021, Sean O'Brien, the leader of a local in Boston, won the election to succeed him, defeating a Hoffa-endorsed opponent. "This is a moment that Local 804 members have waited for, and worked for, for a long time," Perrone wrote in the local's newsletter. "We finally put a fork in the Hoffa era."

The last UPS contract that Hoffa's team negotiated, in 2018, is still a source of rage and bitterness among many Local 804 members and other UPS workers across the country. It created a two-tier system for package-car drivers; those new to the job—known as "22.4s," after the contract provision—occupied the bottom tier, with lower pay and less control over their schedules. Fifty-five per cent of the UPS workers who voted rejected the contract, but the I.B.T.'s leaders still imposed it on their members. (They invoked an archaic clause that was then in the Teamsters constitution, which permitted them to ratify a contract if less than two-thirds of the members had rejected it, and if less than half the members had voted.) "That gave the International Union leadership power to shove the contract down our throats and they did it," 804's newsletter stated.

Scott Damone, the Local 804 busi-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"No, Gemma, the first thing to do in a fire isn't 'get our stories straight.'"

ness agent, told me that, for decades, the I.B.T.'s leaders had favored the drivers, who are more active in the union, fighting hard for raises for them while paying less attention to their part-time co-workers. About the leaders' past treatment of part-timers, he said, "They kept watering down the compensation, and, when they couldn't water down the compensation any more, they went to benefits." In the coming contract negotiations, he said, "it's going to be very important to right some of those wrongs."

This year, the I.B.T.'s list of demands at the bargaining table will include improving part-timers' pay and securing more full-time positions. It will also include the elimination of the 22.4 provision, because those drivers "do the same job every single day as our regular package-car drivers but get paid less, have less protection under the contract," O'Brien told me. "So that will be a strike issue." He also mentioned addressing "the six-day punch," when UPS workers are forced to work six days a week, which is not an issue for Local 804 but is elsewhere. The Teamsters plan to raise other workers' concerns, too, including the lack of air-conditioning in package cars.

This past summer, the Teamsters adopted a tactic that worked well prior to the 1997 negotiations. Instead of waiting to see what UPS's first offer will be at the bargaining table, the union launched a "contract campaign" a year ahead of time, with more than a hundred Teamsters locals holding rallies at UPS buildings and union halls around the country. During three days in early August, Local 804 held fourteen rallies. One of the largest took place outside the UPS hub in Maspeth on a Tuesday at 7:30 A.M. The crowd was mostly drivers. It also included one member of Congress, the left-wing Democrat Jamaal Bowman, who represents parts of the Bronx and Westchester County.

"Listen, this is serious," Perrone said at the Maspeth rally. "This is something that could happen. Not that people want it to happen next year, but we have to let them know the time of the downtrodden worker is over. They're going to tell you, 'You make a good living.' We're going to tell them, 'We need, want, and deserve more!'"

UPS drivers are paid essentially the same amount no matter where they live—a fact that, in Damone's view, helps explain the militancy of Local 804. In a city like New York, with exorbitant housing costs, ninety-five thousand dollars a year does not buy the same comforts that a driver who lives elsewhere might enjoy. "There's a lot more reticence to toe the line in New York, and I don't think it's just because we're all obnoxious New Yorkers," Damone said. "We're not affluent off the job. Guys are just getting by."

The event did not last long, and, afterward, inside workers staggered out of the UPS hub as their shifts ended. Their appearance told the story of their job's rigors better than any union leader's speech: they looked bleary-eyed and depleted. A sixty-three-year-old man emerged wearing a black T-shirt and faded, dirty jeans. He'd been working here for almost three years, he said, before trudging off. A slender twenty-nine-year-old was finishing a shift that had begun at 4:30 A.M. To commute here from his home in the Bronx, he said, he had to leave at 1:30 A.M., then take two buses and two subways. The starting pay at the Maspeth hub is typically $15.50 an hour for jobs like preloader—just fifty cents more than New York City's minimum wage.

The fact that the starting pay is so low particularly rankles veteran inside workers, like Chris Williamson, Local 804's vice-president. Williamson started working at the Maspeth hub as a preloader in 1988, when he was twenty and living in East Flatbush, Brooklyn. "My start time was four o'clock. I would have to leave my house like one o'clock in the morning," he told me. "The reason I stayed was because minimum wage in 1988 was three dollars and thirty-five cents. UPS started me out at nine dollars."

Mike Roberts, a longtime inside worker, walked out of the building a little after 9 A.M. He has what many inside workers want: a full-time job. His shift had started at 11 P.M. the previous day. He had worked at a machine that puts parcels into bags, he explained: "I have to zip them and put the sticker on them, and put them on the belt for their continued journey." In Roberts's view, the level of camaraderie within Local 804—between inside workers and drivers—is largely determined by whether a driver previously worked inside a building "versus came from the street." About those drivers who never held an inside job, he said, "They kind of look at the part-timers or the insiders as if we are, quite frankly, their waiters. They definitely act like they are better than people on the inside."

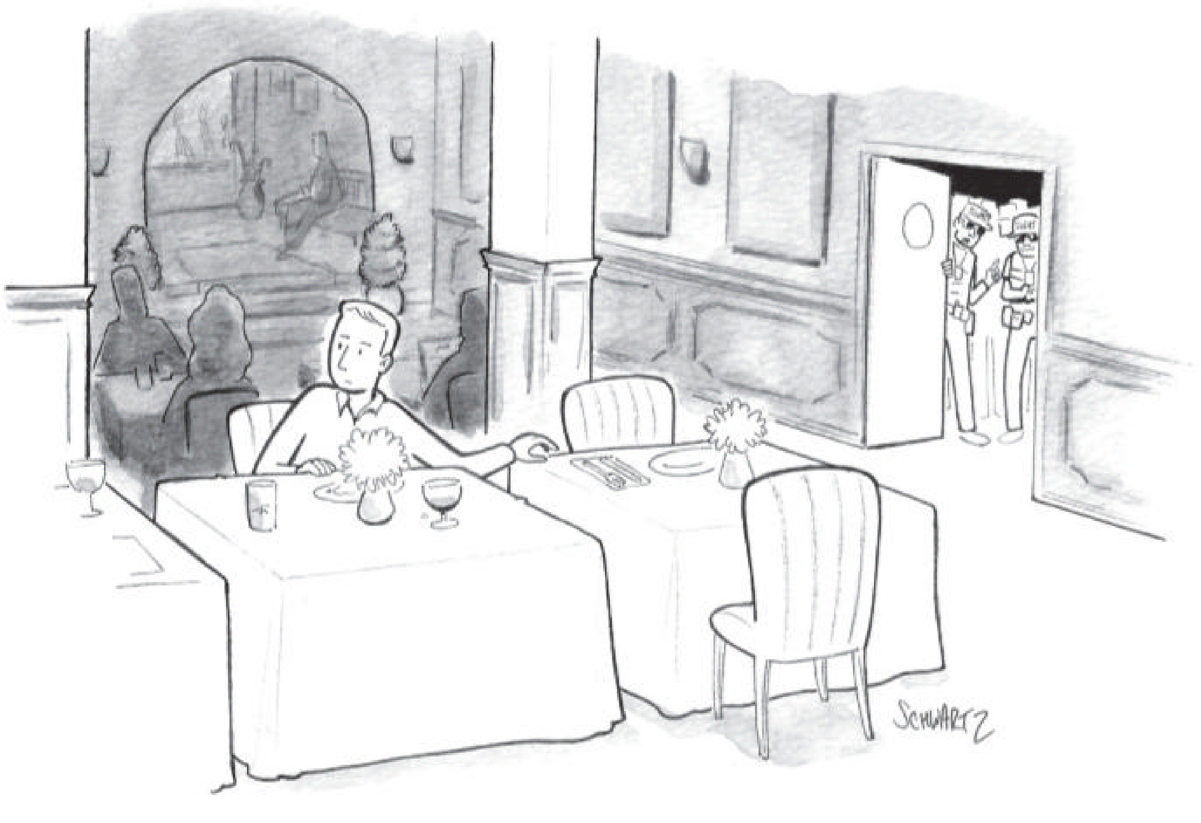
Perrone has been trying to stamp out this way of thinking. "There should be no package-car driver that would say that their job is harder than the preloader, because it's not," he told me. To succeed in their contract battle this year, the Teamsters will need to keep a united front—between inside workers and drivers, between veteran drivers and 22.4s, between "feeder" drivers (who drive tractor-trailers) and everyone else—and Perrone has been insisting on total solidarity. When seventy shop stewards packed into Local 804's hall last fall, he told them that they needed "to start really pissing in people's ears that we see on a daily basis about the pay inequities for part-timers, what we're fighting for in the next contract, getting rid of the 22.4s. Because I'm not going to have package-car drivers or feeders or thirty-, forty-year inside clerks"—some of the highest-paid members of the local—"telling me, 'Well, I've got it good, fuck everybody else.' That's not an option on this one."

The main UPS hub in New York City is in Manhattan, at Forty-third Street and Twelfth Avenue, overlooking the Hudson River. It's a squat brick structure, eight stories high and encompassing an entire block. Since it opened, sixty years ago, glass skyscrapers have risen around it, making it look, in the words of a company spokesperson, "like a little thumb." The building once housed UPS's national headquarters, and it's not hard to figure out which top-floor office belonged to Jim Casey. His picture hangs by the door, along with a framed sign that reads "Jim Casey Occupied This Office 1962-1975."

"It's not a glamorous company," Sarah Shatan, the UPS spokesperson, told me. "But the level of importance of this building and other buildings—I mean, it is unmatched." One recent weekday morning, Shatan showed me around the hub, greeting supervisors by first name. The company's policy book, which was first printed in 1929 and is still given to managers, instructs them to "use first names to generate a friendly and informal atmosphere." Shatan told me that managers will read aloud from the policy book at meetings, and that some ask UPS executives to sign their copies.

The wholesome, old-fashioned image of the company which Shatan conveyed is in line with UPS's reputation in the industry. Marc Wulfraat, a logistics consultant who has tracked the industry for decades, explained that FedEx is "the Cadillac of package delivery"—the best option if you're shipping an item to another country and don't care about the cost. But UPS is better known for its ground-delivery service, which is ideal for customers who are shipping within the U.S. and have a two-to-five-day time frame. UPS, he said, is "the steady-as-she-goes master that does all this work reliably."

Newer UPS buildings reflect the industry's shift to automation, but the Forty-third Street building is a "dinosaur," as one manager put it. The bottom floors are still used for delivery operations, and because this hub is vertical—unlike most hubs, which are horizontal—the parcels take an unusual route. They are unloaded from tractor-trailers on the first floor, then travel on conveyor belts to the second, third, and fourth floors. There, preloaders take them off the belts and load them into package cars; drivers then head down a circular ramp to exit the building. Despite the antiquated setup, drivers from this hub delivered a hundred and forty thousand parcels on the day that I stopped by. It seems an amazing feat. And one that's achieved with remarkable consistency. As Shatan noted, in a recent report on delivery companies' performance, UPS came out on top, with an on-time-delivery rate of ninety-seven per cent.



"He's really going to do it—he's going to replace the fork he dropped by stealing one from the next table. Get ready to swarm."

On another recent morning, I went to Long Island City, in Queens, to visit the headquarters of Local 804. The union has occupied the same two-story building for decades, and it is now extremely run-down. The roof, the toilets, the air-conditioners—everything was falling apart. Stains streaked the carpets. "Excuse the dump," Vinnie Perrone, 804's president, said when I walked in.

Perrone sat at his desk, vape pen in hand, a photo of Ron Carey on the wall behind him and a black Teamsters jacket hanging on a coatrack nearby. In his view, UPS's recent successes have come at a steep cost to its workers. When Perrone began driving for UPS, in 1994, he explained, he was delivering items that customers had ordered from "the Fingerhut catalogue or the Macy's catalogue." In his early years on the job, he said, "you'd curse and moan if you had a Gateway computer. Remember the cow boxes? It was three or four pieces, and they were big! You'd curse and moan if you had the old twenty-inch or twenty-six-inch TVs with the big backs. That would be once in a blue moon." In those days, he recalls, the way the package cars were loaded was more organized. "Most times, you could just walk right through your truck. Everything was really in order on the shelves."

Once online shopping took off, however, new items began appearing in the back of his package car. "You could order fire pits, barbecues, futons," he said. He found himself wrestling with extremely heavy items, like outdoor pool covers. Car tires began to appear in the back of his package car, too: "People got into ordering tires, because you could get cheaper tires online instead of going to Goodyear or wherever. Stacks of four tires, banded together. A mountain of tires in the trucks. It's very hard to navigate with stuff like that."

Perrone made it twenty years before he had a serious injury. In 2014, he was trying to move a heavy box, "and I heard my shoulder rip. It felt like stitches popping almost," he said. "I blew out my rotator cuff." Three years later, he had another injury. As Perrone tells it, he was in the back of his package car when a fifty-pound box fell on his knee. The knee later swelled up "like a cantaloupe," he said, and not long afterward he lost his job.

Perrone says that he was fired "because I got hurt on the job," but his termination letter gives other reasons, including "failure to follow methods, procedures and instructions." (UPS said that it "cannot substantiate or share personal employee information.") The union got him his job back, and in 2019 he became president of Local 804. In his new role, Perrone likes to say, "my job is to make management feel exactly as uncomfortable as they make our members feel." Today, he is also a trustee of the I.B.T., as well as its Eastern Region Package Director, tasked with helping other UPS locals prepare for this year's contract battle.

After he became president of Local 804, one of the first fights he took on involved UPS's practice of using "personal-vehicle drivers," or P.V.D.s. UPS has long hired seasonal workers, but in 2015 the company began hiring P.V.D.s to drive their own cars and deliver packages during "peak," the company's busiest season, which runs from November to January. In the fall of 2019, company officials informed Perrone at a meeting that UPS was going to begin employing P.V.D.s within Local 804's jurisdiction. "I said, 'What did you say? S.T.D.s? DVDs?' I already knew what was coming. And they looked at me and they said, 'No, P.V.D.s.' I said, 'Yeah, no. We're not agreeing to that.'"

Local 804 filed a grievance, arguing, among other things, that the Teamsters' national contract with UPS prohibits package-car drivers from being required to use their personal vehicles. In 2021, an arbitrator ruled that UPS had violated the union contract but limited his ruling to 2019. The practice continues—and continues to anger Perrone. According to the arbitrator's decision, UPS's hiring of P.V.D.s increased tenfold between 2017 and 2019. This peak season, UPS hired P.V.D.s across the country; some of these drivers were getting thirty-eight dollars an hour in areas where the labor pool is shallow, like San Francisco.

Perrone is dismayed when he sees what UPS drivers in other parts of the country have said on social media about P.V.D.s. "It sort of creeped into people's minds that 'Hey, maybe P.V.D.s aren't so bad, 'cause I'm getting out earlier.' You know, because for once these guys and girls can be home a little earlier during the holidays," he said. "But it's not a good message to send out, because we want to keep our work. We want to not destroy the jobs that we have. We don't want gig jobs. We don't want Uber Eats or DoorDash."

He might also have mentioned Amazon, whose delivery vans proliferate across the country. The drivers of those vehicles are not Amazon employees; they work for delivery services that have contracts with Amazon. There are also the drivers who work for the Amazon Flex program; they are independent contractors who use their own cars, signing up for shifts on an app. These convoluted arrangements make it much more difficult for Amazon to be held legally responsible for the drivers' treatment. It also makes unionizing them nearly impossible; if drivers at a delivery company try to unionize, Amazon can simply cancel that company's contract. (Amazon did not reply to a request for comment.)

The Teamsters are trying to organize Amazon's warehouse workers, but they are limited in what they can do for Amazon's drivers. "The sad part is that the government has allowed this independent-contractor model to basically exploit obligations of employers," Sean O'Brien, the Teamsters leader, told me. "It's really, truly diminished good middle-class jobs." It's also made it difficult for UPS, with its full-time drivers and regular start times, to keep up. Perrone told me that he recently saw an Amazon Flex driver delivering a package to a neighbor's house at 5:45 A.M. "People are waking up to packages on their front doorstep," he said. He imagined what might be going through the minds of UPS executives: "How can we compete with this nonsense?"

Last spring, Antoine Andrews began driving his route just three days a week, Monday to Wednesday. On Thursdays and Fridays, he now works as an organizer, part of a team of UPS drivers from Local 804. The team's mission includes helping Amazon workers to unionize, but Andrews and his fellow driver-organizers have also joined rallies for Starbucks workers and travelled to Ohio and Kentucky to help DHL workers there who are fighting to join the Teamsters.

I found Andrews one day at Local 804's headquarters, where he was meeting with the other driver-organizers in a cavernous room. We sat down on the far side of the room to talk separately, but before long the other drivers started piping up from across the way. There seemed to be a strong feeling among them that the public does not truly understand what the job of UPS driver entails. But Andrews said, "I think the customers recognize that for two years we never clocked out. We were working every single day throughout the pandemic. While the customer stayed home and stayed safe, we delivered the packages."

"They called us heroes," said Antonio Rosario, who was a driver for nearly twenty years and is now a full-time organizer. "The amount of packages that were coming through the system at the time—it was like a year of peak! It was never-ending."

"And the company made billions," Andrews said.

"Billions!" Rosario repeated. "And we didn't get anything. No type of hazard pay. No love." He added, "And then, when the vaccine came out, of course we were the heroes again, because we were the ones bringing the vaccine to everyone." (A UPS spokesperson pointed out that its contract with the Teamsters provides for pay, raises, and cost-of-living adjustments, but not bonuses.)

The conversation went on, with the

Sofia Warren

"My argument sounds better on vinyl."

men recounting stories from their years on the job. The promise of retiring with a full pension keeps many drivers at UPS for their entire careers. But the stresses of the work, both psychological and physical, can take their toll. "I've seen members who've been around a very long time," Andrews said, "and throughout the years I noticed that the limp would become more noticeable."

Dave Carew, a veteran driver who works out of a building in Suffolk County, has a route on Shelter Island, where his deliveries every summer include beach umbrellas and porch furniture. "My average is eight miles a day, forty-five flights of stairs. Half of that carrying something," he said. In recent years, he had been contending with a herniated disk in his neck, which was making his arm and hand numb. Though everyone's body breaks down with age, he said, "here at UPS your body breaks down a lot faster."

Today, in place of Jim Casey's "Manual of Instructions," UPS drivers are required to follow "the methods," the company's set of extremely detailed directions for how to do their jobs. Some are intended to help drivers avoid injuries, with instructions like "Keep package close to your body." The methods also include instructions about how to interact with customers ("Keep your customer contact brief and business-like") and how to be hyperefficient ("Remember five or more stops in advance"). Drivers are told that, as they "move packages to the final selection area," in the back of the package car, they should "visualize the actual delivery of each package."

"The company has great methods," Andrews said, reciting several from memory. He mentioned the "ten-point commentary," UPS's instructions for how to safely operate a package car. Drivers have been known to give it to their teen-age children when they get their learner's permits. "It's not going to eliminate accidents or injuries, but it works," Andrews said. "But the company puts pressure on the drivers to move fast and cut corners."

" 'Follow these methods—but we need you to work *this fast!*' " Rosario said. (UPS objected to this characterization, saying that its methods "prioritize safety and efficiency. For example, drivers are trained to walk quickly and not run.") Rosario went on, "When it comes to lifting packages over seventy pounds, you're supposed to wait for help." But he said that, in that situation, a driver is often told, " 'Oh, well, we have no driver in the vicinity that can get to you.' Now, me, being a veteran driver, I say, 'O.K., I can't deliver this package today,' and it's missed. But there's a lot of drivers out there that don't know any better"—and they deliver the package anyway.

"I'll correct you. They *do* know better," Andrews said. "But they are scared."

When I returned to the union hall a few weeks later, I met with the same group of men, and the conversation continued. Every stop is tracked, they explained, and each driver has a number that he or she is expected to hit—for example, fifteen stops per hour. With G.P.S. tracking and sensors on the package cars, a supervisor can find out just about everything: where every driver is at all times; who pressed his brake with too much force (known as "hard braking"); who backed up his vehicle ten times (backing up is discouraged, because it is more likely to lead to an accident). The company characterizes its use of sensors as a safety measure.

Not all surveillance at UPS is electronic. Sometimes supervisors will follow a driver on his route to watch him from a distance, a practice known as "on-road observation." (UPS calls this practice a "critical part of our safe-driving culture.") Jonathan Santiago told a story about how he and several other UPS drivers used to gather every day at a pizza shop on their lunch break. When the drivers walked in one day, the man behind the counter told them that their supervisor had just been by to check on them.

"He parked a good distance away from the pizza shop," Santiago recalled. But the drivers figured out where he was, and they decided to prank him. "To let him know we know he's there, we sent him two slices of pizza," Santiago said. "They knocked on his door—and he left out of there!" The drivers in the room started laughing.

"It's sort of funny. You laugh about it because there's nothing else you can do. But it's actually pretty sad, too, because guys get mental issues," Elliot Lewis said. "I know a guy who quit the job because he was paranoid."

Matt Leichenger explained that the job had made him paranoid, too. His supervisor drove a gray Ford Explorer, he said, and the sight of that vehicle had started to haunt him. "I was constantly on the lookout for this gray Ford Explorer, because I was, like, 'Are they following me?'" he said. "Even when I was off the job, when I'd see a gray Ford Explorer I'd look to see who was driving."

The drivers explained that their workday does not end until they have tried to deliver every parcel in their package car, and the unpredictability of this schedule can lead to tensions at home. "We always say we have a start time but no finish time," Andrews said. He added that "a lot of people get divorces," and soon afterward he mentioned his ex-wife. "When I would say, 'Hey, I'm working,' at ten o'clock, she's, like, 'You're not *possibly* delivering a package at that time.' But I was!" he said. "So it will definitely cause an issue at home."

Before long, most of the men had left the room, and only Andrews and Santiago remained. "You want to hear something, bro?" Santiago asked Andrews. He began talking about his children, how he used to miss school events all the time, how they would be in bed when he got home. "I missed a lot of good things with my kids," he said.

Andrews said, "How many times you'll make a delivery at someone's door at five-thirty, and they open up the door, and you see the family at the dinner table. And they'll say, 'Hey, you want to come in? There's space for you.'"

"You know what it's like to make deliveries in the summertime, to look at a guy on his front porch having his beer?" Santiago said. "I'm, like, 'Wow, I wonder what that feels like.' Not to say that I want to drink, but it's just, like, these people live a normal life." He added, "This job takes a *lot* from you."

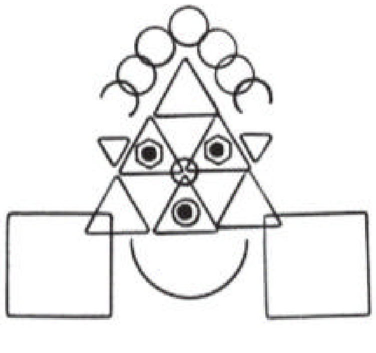
On a Sunday morning not long ago, Local 804 held its last general-membership meeting of 2022, at a union hall in Nassau County. Any other organization that held a Sunday-morning meeting would likely have to contend with members straggling in late, but by ten o'clock there were three hundred Teamsters packed inside—a hundred of them standing at the back. Perrone, his executive board, and business agents were seated on a dais, facing the members. "For What It's Worth," by Buffalo Springfield, blasted from speakers: "There's battle lines being drawn . . ."

The meeting started with Perrone calling the union's newest members to the front of the hall. "You guys are just starting out. These gentlemen sitting here," Perrone said, referring to a group of older men seated in the front row, "they're retired. They made their twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five years in this company. There's light at the end of the tunnel." He added, "Just do the job right." Perrone administered the Teamsters oath, and, when the new members finished reciting it, the crowd stood and applauded them.

"This is a contract year," Perrone continued. "It's very, very important that we pay attention to what's going on." He added, "As we always say, if you don't participate, you can't complain. We don't want to hear it." He mentioned the pay of UPS part-timers—"They deserve better!"—and then segued into a favorite topic: Tomé's compensation package. "They won't pay our members across the country a living wage, but you know what? C.E.O.s can have a twenty-seven-million-dollar benefit package per year. That's not going to fly in 2023!"

The room erupted in applause. (UPS said that this figure is a "significant overstatement" and gave another figure for the value of Tomé's total 2021 compensation package: "15.2 million.")

In recent months, the Teamsters' talk about their coming contract fight has become increasingly militant, but the union is heavily invested in UPS's success. Local 804's quarterly newsletter advises workers not only on how to file grievances but also on how to be reliable employees. One example: "Maintain good attendance, report to work on time every day, and never have no call/no show unless you're in a coma." And, as Amit Mehrotra, of Deutsche Bank, explained, UPS's business strategy is inextricable from its unionized workforce. He mentioned the UPS driver who delivers to his home, in Atlanta: "he's a great guy, and he's been doing it for many, many years." The driver in the brown uniform is key to UPS's success, he believes, because "the most successful logistics companies are the ones that offer the best service."

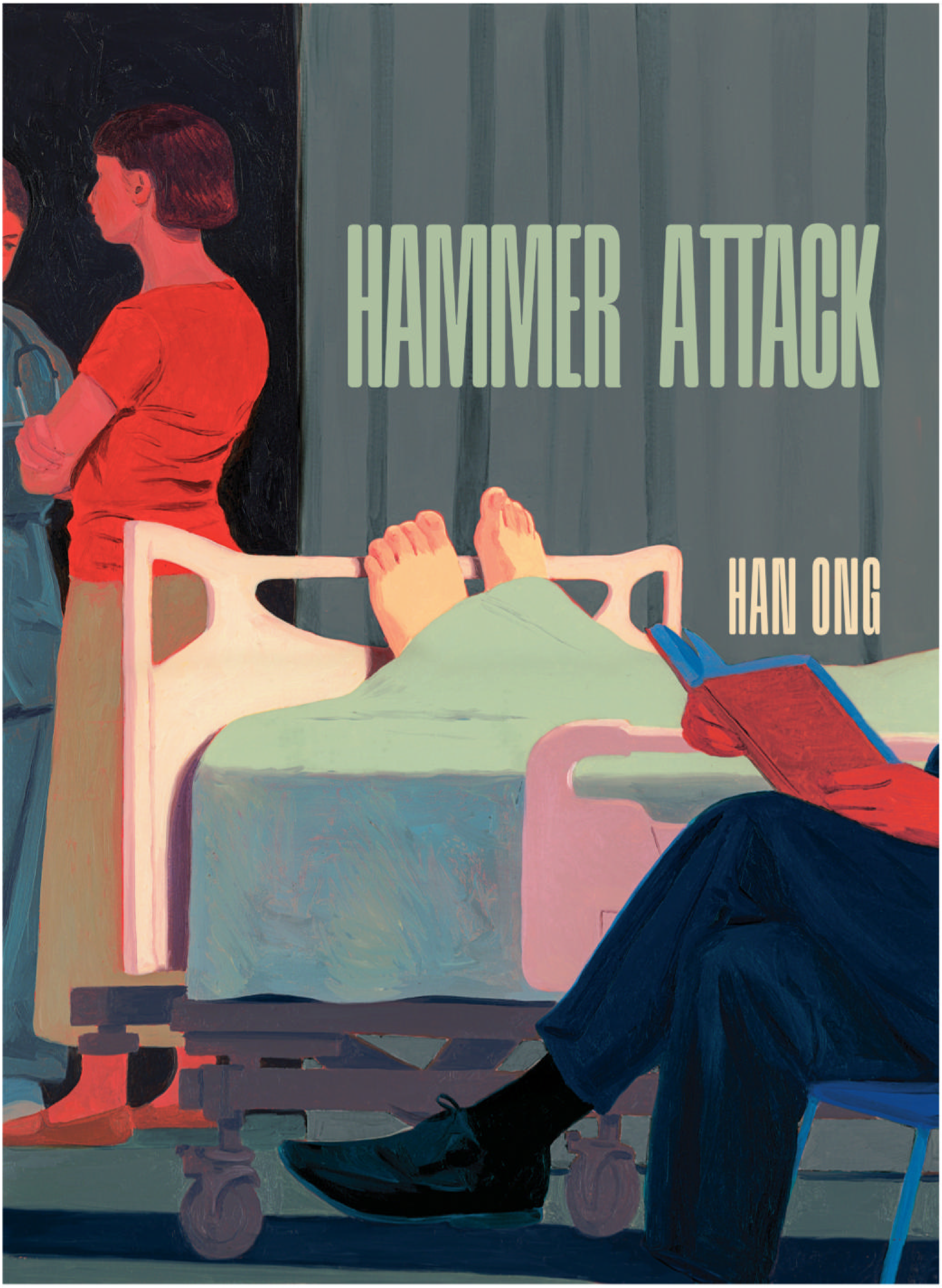


Mehrotra added, "Essentially, UPS's success is tied to the long-term viability of its union labor, and the long-term viability of the union labor vis-à-vis the Teamsters is tied to the success of UPS. And how refreshing it would be if folks can enter these negotiations with that mind-set of 'Hey, let's try to figure out a win-win situation, because my success is your success and your success is my success.'"

The tenor in the union hall, however, was far more combative. Perrone mentioned that some of Local 804's clerks were at risk of being moved to other positions, and added, "We're not going to just lay down and let them take clerk jobs away!" Perrone turned the meeting over to members to ask questions, and those who wanted to speak formed a line in the center aisle. A seventeen-year UPS veteran eventually got his turn. While everyone else had addressed their words to Local 804's leaders, this man walked around the microphone stand so that he could speak directly to his fellow-Teamsters.

The room went silent. Many of the union members knew his story: he was a former driver who had been shot while on his route two years earlier, in Queens. (A teen-ager in a stolen car, reportedly angry about how the driver had double-parked, fired a .22-calibre pistol and hit him in the stomach.) Afterward, he could no longer work as a driver. The union lobbied for many months to get him a new position, and he now works as a porter at a UPS building.

"Vinnie did the oath for the new members," he said. Looking out over the crowd, he exhorted his fellow union members to stick together in the coming months, to not let their managers divide them. "My question to us is: How are we going to help them"—the union leaders at the front—"get us the best contract for 2023?" he said. "That's the question we should all go home, talk to our families, meditate on, and, Monday morning, come in and fight. Because we need better language for *everyone*, from driver to preloader. We got to help each other out, brothers and sisters. We will not survive if we don't." ♦



HAMMER ATTACK

HAN ONG

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID DE LAS HERAS

Three Virgin Marys kept their baleful eyes on the back of Allen's head. But more powers were needed—of clemency, of healing—so, to accompany the dolorous mothers, somebody had also taped to the wall behind Allen's hospital bed half a dozen Jesuses (a few were laminated), the famous "Last Supper" painting, and a grave-looking figure who, Alice, one of Allen's sisters, told Gina, was St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, of last hope. I said to Gina, The school I went to in Manila was called St. Jude. It was next to the church, also called St. Jude, where hundreds of people went for Mass. St. Jude is a very popular saint with the Filipinos, I added. Although, if Gina hadn't asked and Alice hadn't told her, I would not have been hip to this figure's identity. It had been a long time since I'd given any thought to my boyhood, devoutness, obedience, my family.

Allen was, in some ways, a kindred spirit. His one-word self-description, at our first book-group gathering, was "lapsed." What did he mean? You name it, I've lapsed. To much laughter, he enumerated: lapsed Christian, lapsed Korean, lapsed middle-class person, lapsed heterosexual. He was an unusual gay man, but maybe I was relying on stereotypes: he was young but chubby, unstylish, unprepossessing in appearance and manner. He wasn't the most talkative of the bunch of us, and he had a fondness for upspeak, like a teen-ager.

This was 2014, but for those of us who were the children of recent Asian immigrants our parents' self-loathing put a check on visible difference, and this insured a lot of closet cases. Or, at least, overcautious, overwatchful young men and women. I was always on my guard. Still, I, too, said that I was gay—Allen's disclosure encouraged mine. Gina, whom I'd run into over the years at get-togethers of artsy Filipinos and who'd brought me to that first book-club meeting, already knew, of course. Did I tell the others that, like Allen, I had fled a punitive faith, or that, like Allen, I was shrugging off the mantle of my parents' hard-won middle-classhood? Probably not, as I wanted to distance myself from Allen's plodding looks, his plaintive upspeak. We were twins in all ways but the most crucial one: you could have slapped me on a poster of smiling, handsome young gays, selling a sunny cruise or a seedy club. That was something I aspired to.

Allen had two older sisters: Alice, a hospital administrator, had flown in from Philadelphia, and Ruth, who taught economics at a university, from Texas. Ruth was going through a divorce, against her parents' wishes, so she had now displaced Allen as the family disappointment. At the hospital, she was both the maker and the recipient of many angry, divorce-related phone calls, and the latest one had taken her out of the room, leaving me alone with the Christian icons and Allen and his machine-assisted breathing. I walked back and forth in Allen's hospital room, making the laminated Jesuses wink and shimmer. I turned the patient into a blur. Not that Allen was alarming. The surprise on my first visit had been just how unalarming he looked—the neatly bandaged head, the peaceful face and body. Only the words, passed along secondhand by the family, alarmed me: *brain swelling*, *induced coma*. Somebody had taken great pains, and Allen's face was moisturized, his fingernails and toenails trimmed. A new, pale-yellow pair of pajamas covered his body.

I had worried about being left alone with the mother or the father, but they were at a nearby hotel, after having stayed for three days and three nights without sleep. Ruth had had to put her foot down for them to agree to take a break. By all appearances, she was the family powerhouse, and her impending divorce only strengthened this impression—of course someone so authoritative would be impossible to live with. Her soon-to-be ex was white, and their two children were academic high achievers. Alice, with whom Gina had struck up a friendship, said that Ruth had tolerated her husband's years-long affair until she couldn't any longer. (This was necessary talk—anything to divert attention from the comatose patient.) Ruth's husband's mistress was also Korean, and taught at the same university. The husband, too, was employed by the university. A cozy circle, the affair an open secret among colleagues. There was no glee in this gossip when Gina passed it on to me and the rest of the book group, Harry and Linda and Abi and Govinder and Sheila and Sunil and Kyung Hee and Jin. Instead, there was a sense of duty—of filling out our threadbare knowledge of Allen, not letting him down. Already, death was the unspoken presumption among us. Already, we were deep in the practice of memorialization.

Allen: you quit your copywriting job to train as a social worker. You were much admired, quietly admired. We were not a corny bunch, or your downscaled life would have been properly honored. You told very few jokes, and your literary analyses never set fire to anyone's mind. But you were a talented eater, ordering for us after our book-group sessions in the nonprofit office in Koreatown, in one nearby restaurant after another, and placing second orders, despite our false protests. Down to the last grain of rice, the final bead of soup, your bowls were the cleanest. Such a love of life, such a belly: it was hard to believe that your very Asian parents would not have found this part of you, at least, worthy of praise—the Buddha imposture. The things we regret: backslapping you for your appetite, for how much beer you could put away in one sitting, was fake bonhomie, camaraderie at its shallowest.

Ruth returned and exclaimed. He moved! she said. His head moved. It was on one side when I took my call, and now it's on the other. Right? Am I right?

I gave an embarrassed shrug.

She approached him. Hey, buddy, she said, taking his hand in hers and kneading. Bossy and tender. Hey, buddy, we're here. Mom and Dad and Alice and me. And guess who else is here? Roger. Your book-group friend Roger. Say hi, Roger.

Hi, Allen. I'm visiting. I hope it's O.K.

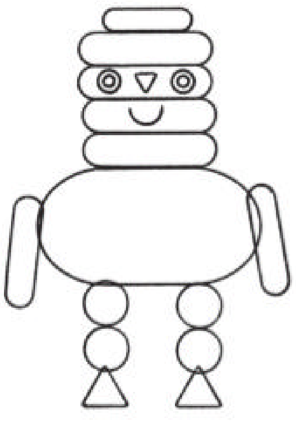
And your other book-group friends—they've dropped in many times. They can't wait to talk books with you again. Right? She turned to me.

That's right. Me thinking, So bossy, so moving.

Show of hands: who's seen the video of the attack, which took place as Allen waited for a train on the subway platform? All hands went up. Hands up—but heads bowed, for the shame of not having been able to resist watching. Thank God the footage was grainy. The violence could be somewhat softened, in our fuzzy viewings, into a mercifully amateur blow, a mere grazing of Allen's person. Although, of course, there was the medical outcome to prove us wrong: a portion of Allen's skull had had to be cut free, to allow space for the blooming, swollen brain.

I watched until the thing hit him, Jin whispered. Not able to say "hammer." *The hammer hit him. On his head. His knees buckling immediately.*

I didn't reveal that I'd viewed the footage more than once. More than twice. The perpetrator's back was to the camera, and he was wearing a roomy coat, the unbuckled belt looped around the waist the only indication that it was not a sheet—so I couldn't even excuse my morbid curiosity by claiming to be playing detective. None of us mentioned the probable race of Allen's attacker: witnesses had noted that he was a Black man. Time and time again, in other similar incidents, two salient facts—the attacker's race, most often Black, and the victim's, always Asian—were soon supplanted by another, even more salient fact: the attackers were, by and large, mentally disturbed men, who'd left a trail of past strikes, who'd been caught, locked up briefly, then set loose. It was not that difficult to supply a homily for their stories: a system of rescue and rehabilitation—of our human responsibility to one another—had failed, and would fail yet again. We were "good" liberals. "Good" Asians. Allies. None of us would speak on the ugliness of one oppressed race going after another. We were waiting for confirmation of our certainties, our hope: it was derangement that had prompted this act, not prejudice; or, rather, derangement unto prejudice, not solely prejudice.



We were not our full complement for that emergency meeting, after the attack: Linda was too pregnant to attend, Govinder was working a late-night paralegal shift in midtown, Sheila and Sunil were still COVID-cautious.

I reported on the progress of no progress: Allen's condition had not deteriorated. Living a few blocks from the hospital, I was the group's designated representative. In two weeks, I was an eight-time visitor. The next most frequent was Gina, with four visits. We spoke of the lack of connection between our book group and Allen's social-work colleagues, whom we sometimes encountered at the hospital. Once we had remarked on the tragedy, our conversations with them petered out. The social workers had the last word: how hateful that this had happened to Allen, of all people, who advocated so patiently for his transient populations, his share of the city's disturbed flotsam. One of the co-workers did us all the favor of voicing the unthinkable: Could one of the homeless men Allen counselled have committed the assault? Could it have been *personal*, not random at all? This was said to Gina, out of earshot of the family. The co-worker had put the cops on notice. It was hard to say which scenario was worse, but Gina and I hoped that it had been random, so that Allen's parents could not say that he had courted violence with his choice of profession.

I waited on word that the parents had gone back to the Delaware suburbs before I returned to the hospital. They were much like my own parents—Easter Island faces, intimidatingly svelte figures. Not an ounce of fat between them, especially emotional fat. Deprivers. Admonishers. A type common among our parents and grandparents. With us, Allen's friends, they'd been warm—up to a point. Their smiles acknowledged that we were more important than they were in Allen's world.

Not once did the parents ask us, How could this have happened? The sisters also did not ask. This free-floating violence had been in New York for a while. It had become our weather.

Also, uncharacteristically, they had not blamed Allen for putting himself in a vulnerable position. Though older Asian women were the primary victim demographic, Asian men had not been spared: we had suffered box-cutter slashes across arms and chests, punches to the face. There was no logic other than opportunism; to be singled out was not necessarily to be seen as weak, without fight. In fact, the one renowned retaliator had been an old Chinese woman, whose rage and quick thinking had transformed her walking stick into a weapon. Digital cheers had greeted the news footage of her attacker—a white man—being carried on a stretcher into an ambulance. His look of utter discombobulation, of not having been remotely prepared for the tables to turn, was the sweetest revenge. Not that the old woman was spared. To regard the photograph of her one Picasso eye encircled by a liver-colored, liver-size bruise was to stop the cheer dead in our throats. This attack had occurred in San Francisco, a city that was similarly living in fear.

In another time, another place, Allen's gayness might have put him in danger, although, of course, with him, as with me, there was no tell. Still, this was one of our potential vulnerabilities. Which we'd forgotten, living in New York, freed by New York.

Actually, Allen's parents scared me—was it O.K. to say this? They had the tiniest faces, which refused to give anything away. In their bedside vigil, they reminded me of twin pieces of tomb statuary. They seemed to be draining light from the room. Their bodies were not tensed with the effort of willing good news but appeared, to me, to be actively ushering in a funeral. Their hope, foolish as it sounded, was for death. Their vision was filled with death. Above all else, they wanted to be proved right, about this country, about their son, who had gone against their gospel twice: in his job and in his sexuality. Maybe more than that. Maybe Allen's tubbiness concealed a core of steel. Maybe he drew energy from his transgressions against the family rule. *Why not continue to disappoint your parents and live, Allen? Live.*

Mostly, I feared his parents' X-ray eyes. They could see that I was one Asian gay keeping another Asian gay company, our fates mirrored. The frequency of my visits, compared with those of Allen's other contemporaries—this was a clue you did not need X-ray vision to decode. But the sisters were discreet. They could have asked if Allen and I had been lovers—an understandable assumption, given how many times I visited. I saw myself as they likely did, as a character in a story: What is the connection between these two people? What do the visits *mean*? There was a time when I would've been outraged by the suggestion that I might be romantically linked to someone like Allen. But now nothing was too far-fetched.

If COVID had been a giant upender of life's order, this new regime of fear was even more despotic.

At the hospital, I was not able to look Allen in the face. And though staring at his tender pajamas was, in a way, worse, my eyes usually settled on his legs—the largest unmoving part of him—and his exposed toes, the tenderest sight of all. According to Ruth, the nurse had encouraged freeing his toes from the blanket every so often because doing so promoted a more restful, deeper sleep, something borne out by the tabulating machines bedside. Breath, pulse, heart rate, brain activity.

Alice came to relieve Ruth and me. The two of us had learned to sit quietly together, to not be disturbed by the silence. We went to the large cafeteria on the ground floor. We ran into one of Allen's doctors, who repeated the report she had just made to Alice. Allen's brain swelling seemed to be going down, but, since it was still a matter of millimetres, it would take a few more days to have a definitive answer. The coma would be reversed once the brain was back to normal, if all of Allen's vitals held.

Ruth was flying home at the end of the week. She and Alice would then alternate, each staying in New York City for a week at a time. I was surprised by Ruth's revelation that their parents had been banished from the hospital. This was because they had talked endlessly of Allen's death, of flying the body back to Korea, burying it in a family cemetery that nobody had heard of. How shockingly close I'd come to the truth—these people were indeed carrion birds, actively waiting for death.

Ruth told me, with a sigh, At least they didn't say what they would normally say in a situation like this: *We should never have come to America.*

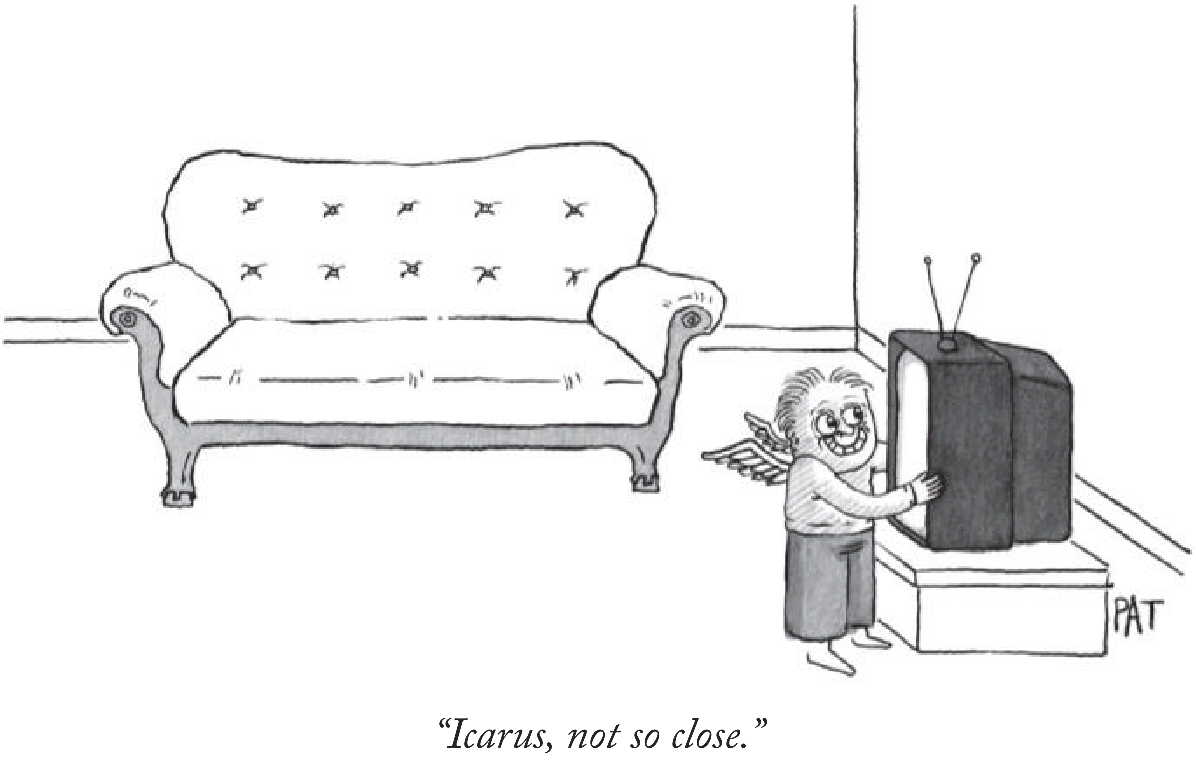
I told her about Manila, a bastion of hard-line Christianity and Catholicism; I told her about my lapsed Catholicism, how much Allen and I had in common—two former advertising copywriters who had quit within a year of each other. Like Allen, I had downsized into a trickier New York existence: the life of a writer.

Ruth made a joke about the danger of revealing things to a writer, and then revealed them anyway: there was no question that she would fight for full custody of the children, even with no sympathy from her parents, who disapproved of her very public failure.

An idea occurred to her on the way back upstairs. Maybe I would read to Allen? She didn't need to explain. This was now common lore: patients in comas responded to sound. Talking to the medically unconscious was a way of massaging their brains into recognition of the present moment, the suspended vitality, the sunshine through the foliage. It would better prepare them to hold up their end of the conversation when they awakened. This was romantic, foolish, meaningful. This was something I could do—better than just sitting there, staring dumbly at nothing.

Of course, I knew immediately what the book would be: "The Makioka Sisters," by Junichiro Tanizaki. We had been drawn to our book club as an opportunity to rekindle a relationship with our parents' cultures. Our breakthrough, which arrived in our mid-thirties, after decades of avoidance and shirking, of not wanting to be seen as "Asian," had been to admit that, yes, it was our culture, too. Softened—by our own aging, and by our parents' mortality—we had decided to go back to informal school: a curriculum of Asian and Asian American literature, voluntarily subscribed to, diligently cultivated; for some of us, joyously so. We'd read Kawabata (Sunil's favorite), Amy Tan (loved mainly by the women in the group), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (deemed too experimental by most of us), Osamu Dazai (too existential), Mishima (no one's favorite), and then Allen had suggested the Tanizaki, to which we'd devoted three consecutive months, breaking the book up into roughly hundred-and-fifty-page sections. Our regard for the book had not carried over to its recommender. Allen remained the schlubby attendee whose literary insights were strictly middle of the road, unexciting. Count on Sunil and Kyung Hee to light up the room with their dashing analyses, yoking contemporary references to a novel set in Japan in the thirties and forties, and electrifying our view of prose that could sometimes seem too serene, too well behaved. Sunil worked in publishing, and Kyung Hee held a master's in English. The book club had been their brainchild. Gina had spotted an announcement on a bulletin board at Hunter College, where she worked in enrollment admin. And since I was struggling to write a novel she had encouraged me to go, to take my mind off my own efforts and dip back into book love. Maybe a flyer had also found its way to Allen's social-agency office, or maybe he'd eyed a notice at a Koreatown joint and, since the meetings were only a few doors away, figured why not drop in?

To read "The Makioka Sisters" was to be taken into a glamorous fantasy of Japan (what is often referred to as a "vanished way of life"), though there were fault lines in the novel's pristine surfaces that made it more than a mere touristic stroll. The family at the center of the story was caught between eras, between national and societal modes of



"Icarus, not so close."

being; it was fracturing. Leading the charge toward the uncertain future was the youngest sister, Taeko. Her name, unfortunately for a Tagalog speaker like me, was pure comedy: to a Filipino, "*tae ko*" meant "my shit." Honestly. Gina, though Filipino, too, spoke no Tagalog; she had been born in California, and had never gone to the Philippines. She had to be told of the translation, the rude joke. It was she who encouraged me to reveal this "fun fact" to the group, and it was Sunil who defused the group chagrin by saying that, if you thought about it, My Shit was an appropriate tag for Taeko, who owned up to her "crap" as the clan troublemaker: her heedless love life derailed the family's need to see Taeko's older sister married before she herself could be paired off. She was the beloved family rebel of our own romantic self-projections.

For a session or two, this comedy of cultures had made me an improbable book-group standout, and Sunil and Kyung Hee encouraged me to contribute more of my opinions and thoughts. Of course, on most subjects I remained circumspect. They knew that I was gay and that I was a writer. But nobody, not even Gina, was privy to my writing.

For two weeks, following my cafeteria lunch with Ruth, I did not go back to the hospital. I tapped the grapevine for updates: the brain swelling had not yet reduced enough to reverse Allen's coma, to wake him up to his changed world. The perpetrator remained at large, stoking everyone's fears that he would find another victim.

I was avoiding keeping my promise to Ruth, to read to Allen. I was also not at my apartment. I was alternating between Gina's place in midtown east, near Hunter, and Abi's, on the Lower East Side. My pact with both women was to be the Hedge Against Violence. Gina texted me when she left work, and I walked a few blocks to escort her home. Abi always made sure to text when she was a few subway stops away, so that I could meet her outside the turnstiles. Both women paid me in takeout and Netflix. Writing was the most portable of endeavors, and Gina and Abi joked that I could forgo my rent and make a travelling circuit of our friends' apartments, serving as the Subway Escort, the Nighttime Walker, the Muscled Protector. A new twist on the rom-com: a supposedly gay man falls for the female friend he sleeps next to—to assuage her fears of attack and also to make COVID days bearable. The movie pitches wrote themselves, at least they did to Gina, cackling. Your talents are wasted at Hunter, I said. Still, Gina was the most self-reliant of women, and for her to have to request my help—I understood that some threshold of peeve had been crossed, some unspoken anger at Asian female accommodation overcome, yet again: did she have to hit the racial bull's-eye so squarely, being physically slight, seemingly defenseless? How could anyone, looking at her, possibly imagine her daily fury? The news did not stay remote, a world apart, as it should: it had swept up one of our own, and every day that did not end in screaming rage for a member of our group was a small triumph.

As for myself, I exchanged my regular gym-locker lock for a whopper of steel, nearly the size of a fist and weighty enough to qualify as workout equipment, and placed this in my tote to weaponize it. Also, like a lot of my friends, I took to wearing a baseball cap and to concealing my eyes behind large dark glasses. The windows that I passed reflected this new creature: at once aghast and glamorous, a movie star not quite used to being stalked, jumpy with presentiment. I had not bought pepper spray, as Linda and Abi and Sheila and Kyung Hee and Jin and Gina had, though not everyone had researched tutorials for its use. I also hadn't bought a whistle—unlike Sunil and Kyung Hee and Jin. And definitely not a switchblade, which would have been a greater danger for my fingers than for any attacker. But Govinder now carried one. And Sunil said that one was in his online cart, waiting for him to finalize its purchase. Ditto Harry.

Our book club started up again, after a two-year COVID break. Of course, we were still in the midst of COVID; or maybe we were at its tail end—or maybe that was merely the human disease of hope.

For our first discussion, we decided to meet in Koreatown, at a restaurant with an open-air sidewalk shed, as long as the structure's traffic side had a boarded window so that we were not in easy reach of a would-be attacker. We were missing some people: Linda due to deliver any day, Abi at her self-defense class, Govinder dealing with family issues, Sheila still COVID-hesitant, although Sunil had agreed to come.

We were planning to discuss the first hundred pages or so of "The Makioka Sisters." We did this every once in a while—brought back beloved books, counting on time to be a co-participant, to deepen our rereading, sometimes to reverse meanings. We had voted on "The Makioka Sisters" even before the attack on Allen.

I waited until the end of our session to tell the others about my promise to Ruth, to be Allen's bedside reader.

What a great idea, Kyung Hee said.

How far have you gotten? Sunil asked.

I haven't. I'm thinking of starting tomorrow?

I think I'll do it, too, Sunil said. Is that O.K.?

The more the merrier, I said.

Let me look at my calendar, Kyung Hee said. I'd like to read to him, too, if I can.

Me also, Gina said. She and I exchanged smiles.

Alice was at the hospital when I got there. I briefly explained the reading plan, and before she left to take a break she turned serious.

Do you think the guy will ever be caught? she asked me.

What have the cops said?

I haven't been talking to them directly. They set us up with this liaison. An Asian American community woman. She's been great. And frank.

What did she say?

Any additional day that he remains free, the chances of him getting caught are slimmer. It's been a month. Cases like Allen's—they don't usually take this long to get resolved.

Did they look into Allen's contacts? I asked.

Nothing there, Alice said. Thank God.

Thank God. I asked her about the precautions she was taking.

She shrugged off my concern. I'm either here or at the hotel. It's three blocks away. I don't even see the hotel most days. I sleep here. I eat here. I live my remote life here.

I'll get you a whistle, I said.

PICTURE THIS

I feel bad for the inventor of Comic Sans.
I, too, have made mistakes.
Like opening the bathroom door in a bar
to a stranger rag-dolled on the toilet,
her face closed for the night.
I, too, wanted
the impossible—to carve a hole in the floor,
retreat
into lost time. Earn someone's forgiveness,
maybe even
my own. But, instead,
I accidentally invented panic, then futility.
I wanted to forget
what I had seen, who I had been,
so I turned us both into flowers.
I invented bees
and a yellow bird to watch over us,
but it wasn't enough.
Others had already invented doom
and repetition.
I cut myself
a break, fashioned a little
more time—enough to learn
which mistakes were mine to make.

—*Jiordan Castle*

She was skeptical. What would a whistle *do*?

Buy you time. Flag attention. Scare the guy off.

She seemed taken aback. You've really thought about it.

It was my turn to shrug.

I'd got to page 20 of "The Makioka Sisters" by the time she came back. She sat and listened for ten more pages. Ruth told me you're a writer?

Yes.

This must be good for you, too, she said. Being reminded how stories work. Hearing sentences.

I told her that it was a pleasure to have Tanizaki's sentences—short, direct, for the most part—in my mouth. But, unfortunately—for me, at least—there was nothing to "learn" from the mastery of someone like Tanizaki. He was like Chekhov. Writers of life. Geniuses of life. Their prose often likened to a windowpane: transparent, artless, nothing to distract from the characters' thinking, feeling, *living*. The accomplishment was in how much Tanizaki knew, in his store of human foibles and strengths, in the way he allowed his characters to display both. There was no style but life, no syntax but life, its logic and illogic, its ebb and flow. To learn from Tanizaki, a writer might as well park himself on a public bench and observe all passersby.

I looked over to see Alice crying. I had much to overcome before I could pat her on the shoulder. I'm sorry, she said. It's just—it's so wonderful that my brother has such smart friends. I love that for him! And then, like a Tanizaki character, like a Chekhov character, she crumpled and was full of despair, saying, What if he never wakes up?

I said, I know he will. It was a lie.

I left my copy of the book at the hospital. Those who wished to read to Allen would not have to worry about lugging their volume back and forth. My hardback came with a ribbon sewn into the binding, to be used as a bookmark. Readers knew where to pick up from and knew to place the ribbon for the next reader. Alice was reading to Allen, a few pages at a time. Ruth was, too, when she was there. Both had started reading the book themselves. I supposed that they were trying to find their brother in it, that we all were; and because I had started this group project, of digging a connecting tunnel between the patient and his book-group selection, I felt the unwelcome weight of responsibility.

Still, I had a sense that by ministering to Allen with the Tanizaki I was planting a flag against the competing claims of the Christian icons overlooking his bandaged head, hoping to reabsorb him, though, since I knew all about deep renunciations, I doubted the icons had a chance. But who's to say? A hammer blow could knock you back a lifetime. You could wake up to find all your adult affiliations erased, and yourself restored to childhood innocence, childhood stupidities. I slowed down my readings of the more sensuous passages: the beauty of the Makioka sisters, nature descriptions (*cherry blossoms!*), mentions of food. Especially the food. I reread those sentences to Allen, turning them into a kind of song, or prayer. Calling him back to the safety of his former personality: a hearty eater, perhaps a heartbroken sublimator. I grew less ashamed and less self-conscious about my limited knowledge of Allen's life. I discussed none of this with the other members of the group.

By the time I returned to the hospital, the readers had progressed to page 167.

I was relieving Ruth this time. I could not, for the life of me, get to page 169. I was distracted by Allen's exposed toes. I put the book down and focussed on my obsession. This seemed appropriate, given that I was reading from a book that had many descriptions of body parts and physical features, of clothes and shoes being put on and taken off. Soon, I was moved to touch Allen's toes. I didn't even check to see if the coast was clear. Some fragrance came off them, confirming my hunch that somebody was taking special care. I sniffed my fingers—something citrusy, also medicinal. I still could barely glance at Allen's face. The toes were safe and to them I stuck. I rubbed, pulled them, rotated them, individually and then two or three together. I told myself that I was helping his blood to circulate, and also it was a way of talking, although what, exactly, my communication amounted to I couldn't say. I thought of the toes as fat children. They effused health, *aliveness*. They reminded me of sumo wrestlers, whose habits and corpulence gave them the unintended benefit of the softest skin. Ruth caught me in the act. She had been observing for a while before she spoke up. Don't stop, she said, laughing. I do that, too.

The group assembled at Kyung Hee's Upper West Side apartment. Once again, we were not all there. We were resigned to incomplete numbers for the foreseeable future. Kyung Hee's two small children were being kept busy in their bedroom by a new animated movie, and her husband was out with friends.

The attacker had been caught. Kyung Hee thought that it might be a good idea for us to lay eyes on him for the first time as a group, to help one another absorb, as Abi called it, "all the feelings." Being a news junkie, Kyung Hee had already seen the video of the arrest. It was the standard footage of a handcuffed suspect being taken out of the back of a police car and walked into the precinct house. Unlike the subway video, this one was Weegee-bright, she said. Kyung Hee did her best to prepare us. She cued the video up not on her large-screen TV but on a tiny iPad she had set up on the kitchen counter. The occasion called for reduction. Despite the grimness, there was Chinese takeout, there was wine.

Wait, Gina said. So is he Black? she asked Kyung Hee. Is the guy Black?

Yes, Kyung Hee said.

He'd been arrested in Philadelphia. He'd used a knife this time. His most recent victim was not Asian but another Black man he'd fought with while waiting in line at a soup kitchen. He'd followed his antagonist to a park bench and stabbed him twice. He had on the same coat he wore in the video from the subway platform. He carried a New York I.D. Also, there had been slightly hazy security-cam shots of him fleeing the subway attack, and the height and physiognomy and hair all seemed to match.

Wait, Gina said. I can't do this. I've already hated so much. I don't want to add more hate. I'm sorry.

To my surprise, I agreed with Gina, and, since we were the only abstainers, Kyung Hee walked us to her home office and shut the door for us.

We engrossed ourselves in the impressive library. The view from Kyung Hee's desk was of the facing brownstones. This was not our first time there. There had been book-group sessions that Kyung Hee had hosted previously, when she'd had the apartment to herself, her husband taking the children to visit her in-laws while she was chained to the academic calendar, unable to get away. We'd paid the proper tributes to her lovely home, laughed about the looks some of us received in the elevator from the other tenants—it was that kind of building.

Are you going to visit Allen tomorrow? Gina asked.

I wasn't planning to.

Because I was there just now? And somebody should redo the few pages I read—if you can call what I did reading.

Who was there? Alice?

Ruth. I don't think she likes me.

What makes you say that?

Doesn't she ice you out? Oh, I see. She's one of those women—she does better with men than women.

I don't know about that, I said. Why was your reading so bad?

I kept getting distracted.

I waited with some excitement for Gina to reveal her toe fetish so that I could share my own.

Sometimes I believe the reading is working, she said. I see a twitch on his face, and I think, This is him about to stir. This spasm has deeper implications. But sometimes I think, What am I doing, reading a book about imperial Japan to a Korean man? Reading a book by a *colonizer*?

Gina, the book was Allen's suggestion.

By the time it was his turn to pick, we'd had our third Korean book in a row, and also we'd just lifted the no-Japanese-for-a-while rule. What else was he going to choose?

He could've picked something Chinese.

This was the time when China was suppressing the Hong Kong protests. We weren't going to touch China for a while. Remember?

Something Filipino?

Come on, Gina said. Even I can't name a Filipino novel to save my life.

So he didn't say anything in our discussions about why he chose Tanizaki? I asked.

Do *you* remember anything?

O.K., I said, capitulating. Maybe I'm doing this for me. I love the book. I feel like I looked at Allen a different way after we were through with it. I remember thinking, Good on you, Allen.

This didn't satisfy Gina, who continued to sulk.

You don't have to read, I told her. You can just sit with him. Also, maybe you can plan your visits to coincide with Alice's, so you don't see Ruth.

What happened to the parents?

I explained the Parental Death Watch to Gina. In the middle of my comedy spiel, I froze. Every day that Allen remained unconscious was a day when the parents emerged more into the light as seers, soothsayers: the inevitable funeral, the burial in a family plot in faraway Korea, Allen stolen from us a second time. I started crying right in the middle of Kyung Hee's ridiculously swanky home office. I'm not someone to go on crying jags. Just as suddenly as I started, I stopped.

Are you O.K.?

I shrugged.

Do you want to stay over at my place?

I shrugged.

Have you noticed . . .

What? I asked.

Nothing, she said. It's stupid.

Were you going to mention Allen's toes?

What?

Forget it, I said.

Toes? I was going to say, have you noticed that Allen has the most handsome face, that he has the smoothest skin? Toes, really? Are you being serious?

You never look at his toes?

Why would I? You're such a weirdo. She took only a moment's rest. Toes? Now I'm not going to be able to stop myself from looking! But wait. I never thought of Allen as handsome before. But today? Now it was her turn to cry.

All this emotion was disgusting, this Reign of Feeling, fear the least of it.

Kyung Hee was at the open door. Everything O.K.?

Give us a minute, I said.

We returned to a glum group. None of them would speak about what they had seen. Kyung Hee threw out a handful of dates for our discussion of the next installment of "The Makioka Sisters." The venue would be Koreatown again. The same restaurant with the outdoor shed. Gina and I had our jackets on, and were milling with the group at the threshold, when Kyung Hee asked us to stay behind. Just checking up on you, she said. Making sure you're O.K.?

Just emotional, Gina said.

You're sure you don't want to watch the video? I mean, before you leave. With me here? No pressure, no judgment.

I'm sure, Gina said.

I guess we'll have to eventually. I don't mean "have to." I don't know what I mean. Sometime in the future. But not now.

Understood, Kyung Hee said.

Tell Kyung Hee what you just told me, Gina said.

What? Get out of here. I'm taking her home, I said to Kyung Hee.

Good. I'm glad. But Kyung Hee would not let me off so easy. What did you tell Gina?

Tell her, Gina said.

Nothing, I said to Kyung Hee. Note to self: this is clearly not a safe space! I added, smiling.

Tell her, Gina repeated.

I sighed. Just that I couldn't stop staring at Allen's toes. It was a totally innocent remark. The most innocent of remarks.

Oh, my God. Kyung Hee did the thing with her hands in front of her mouth, to contain her laughter. You, too?

My smile was so wide. See? I said to Gina. I'm not the only one! It's not so weird!

He has the best toes! Kyung Hee said. She was partly shocked, mostly happy.

Doesn't he? Aren't they, I don't know, kind of *delectable*? Obviously I don't mean delectable. *Beautiful*. And, obviously again, I don't mean beautiful. Or do I?

Charismatic? Is it wrong to call somebody's toes charismatic? Kyung Hee said.

Weirdos, Gina said. All this time, surrounded by weirdos and I was clueless! Yet she was laughing. Reluctantly, at first. But soon we three were all more or less on the same wavelength.

Kyung Hee was laughing so hard that she had to close the door momentarily, so the sound wouldn't carry into the hallway. And then Gina stopped laughing—gradually, not suddenly. There was nothing to flag the change. Meanwhile, Kyung Hee said to me, You're so bad! You're the worst! Encouraging me like this.

I can't help it, I replied. Every time I visit, there they are—his toes. Being aired—that's how Ruth says one of the nurses described it. And because the levity had been calling for this moment, I revealed that I had even touched the toes.

You what! Gina said. She was the picture of calm, but the volume of her voice was unmistakable.

Her next utterance was even louder: I'm so glad this thing happened to Allen so that both of you could know that he has *the best toes!* The calm, it turned out, was anger.

What? Kyung Hee said.

Nothing, I said very quickly. Meaning: Disregard her. Meaning: She didn't mean it. I was more perturbed than I let on. To Gina, I was a lost cause—who but me would so casually reveal that I'd handled our unconscious friend's body? But Kyung Hee was our group's designated grownup—and to witness me swaying her into laughter was suddenly too much. Gina had also succumbed to my seductions, but no more. She was rescinding all complicity. If the joke—if indeed it was a joke—was going to rest on Allen, she would not play any part in it.

Gina, we're sorry. Shock, hurt, contrition were on Kyung Hee's face.

I'm taking you home, I said to Gina. I didn't defuse the anger—best to leave it in the air to clear itself, or maybe I was a coward. Or it could even have been relief that I was feeling. From the moment of Allen's hospitalization, we had been passing a ball from hand to hand, and nobody had had the courage to throw it down on the ground until now. I patted Kyung Hee's arm to communicate solidarity, to say my goodbye.

On the subway, Gina allowed me to lace the fingers of my hand over her fingers. At some point, she started squeezing, and, at some point after that, it was clear that she was not returning my affection. My fingers were turning white. She meant to cause me pain, or at least discomfort. I knew that only an audible cry from me would satisfy her. I closed my eyes. I thought, I can take this. Yes, I was silently saying to her, I deserve the pain. But, mostly, I did not want to give Gina the pleasure of seeing me flinch. I stared straight ahead. It was night, but I had on my habitual sunglasses and baseball cap. ♦

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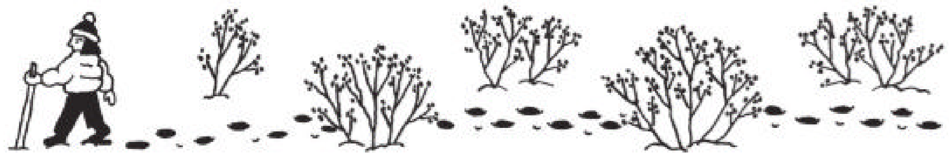
Han Ong on fiction and the news.

THE CRITICS



ABOVE: LIANA JEGERS

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE AMERICAN BEAST

Accounting for the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

BY JILL LEPORE

> Trump is going to do some crazy shit.
> —*Steve Bannon, October 31, 2020*

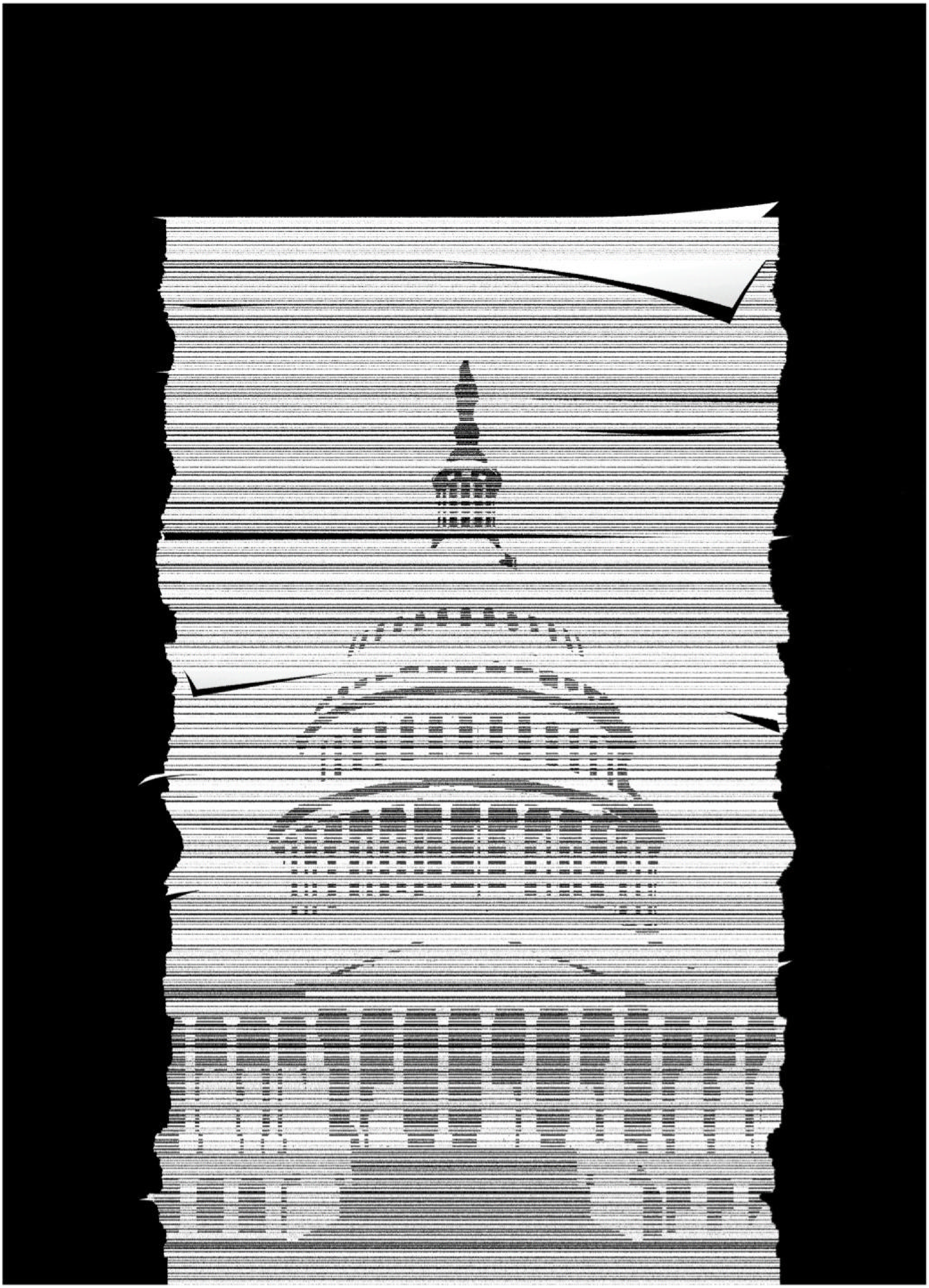
The Government Publishing Office's eight-hundred-and-forty-five-page report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol is divided into eight chapters, makes eleven recommendations, attaches four appendices, and includes four thousand two hundred and eight-five endnotes. Its executive summary, which at nearly two hundred pages can hardly be called a summary, provides a numbered list of seventeen key findings, the first eleven of which have, as the subject of the predicate, the forty-fifth President of the United States:

1. Donald Trump purposely disseminated false allegations of fraud. . . .
2. Donald Trump refused to accept the lawful result of the 2020 election. . . .
3. Donald Trump corruptly pressured Vice President Mike Pence to refuse to count electoral votes. . . .
4. Donald Trump sought to corrupt the U.S. Department of Justice. . . .
5. Donald Trump unlawfully pressured State officials and legislators. . . .
6. Donald Trump oversaw an effort to transmit false electoral certificates. . . .
7. Donald Trump pressured Members of Congress to object to valid slates of electors. . . .
8. Donald Trump purposely verified false information filed in Federal court. . . .
9. Donald Trump summoned tens of thousands of supporters to Washington for January 6th. . . .
10. Donald Trump purposely sent a social media message publicly condemning Vice President Pence. . . .
11. Donald Trump refused repeated requests over a multiple hour period that he instruct his violent supporters to disperse and leave the Capitol. . . .

In a foreword to the report, Bennie G. Thompson, the committee's chairman, stresses the importance of "accountability at all levels," but although the word "conspiracy" appears both in finding No. 12—"Each of these actions by Donald Trump was taken in support of a multi-part conspiracy to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 Presidential election"—and more than a hundred times elsewhere in the document, the report is less an account of a conspiracy than a very long bill of indictment against a single man.

Two years ago, the President of the United States attempted to overturn an election for no reason other than that he had lost. A mere handful of Republican officeholders denounced him; for months, nationally prominent members of the G.O.P. refused to acknowledge that Joseph Biden had won the Presidency. On January 6, 2021, at Trump's urging, thousands of his supporters staged an armed, lethal, and yet somehow also inane insurrection at the Capitol, aimed at preventing a joint session of Congress from certifying the results of the election. They failed. Unless you count being temporarily banned from Twitter as punishment, the former President has suffered no consequences for his actions; Republicans have refused to hold him to account, not least because many Party leaders have been implicated in the attempted overthrow of the United States government. Days after the insurrection, the House voted to impeach the President, but the Senate then failed to convict him. Months later, the House voted to establish an independent, 9/11-style commission to investigate the insurrection, but the Senate blocked that by way of the filibuster. The House soon voted to hold its own investigation, under the aegis of a select committee composed of seven Democrats and six Republicans. Then Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House, refused to seat on the committee two Republicans who had supported the insurrection, whereupon Kevin McCarthy, the Republican Minority Leader, denounced the committee and pulled his members from it, after which the G.O.P., declaring the attack on the Capitol to have been "legitimate political discourse," censured the two Republicans who did serve on the committee, Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, both of whom left office this month. (Cheney lost her bid for reëlection, and Kinzinger declined to run.)

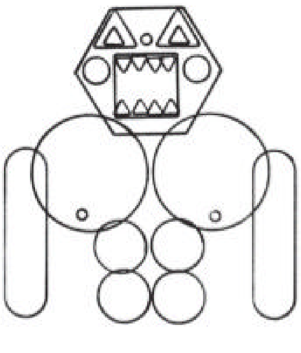
Congress established the January 6th Committee on June 30, 2021. The committee's report is the fullest record yet of the conspiracy to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election, much of it deriving from the dauntless work of earlier reporters, much of it newly gathered by the committee itself. In the course of eighteen months, the committee reviewed thousands of pages of evidence and presented testimony from more than seventy witnesses during ten televised hearings produced with the aid of the former president of ABC News and illustrated with taped video interviews, Facebook posts, text messages, YouTube clips, and surveillance footage, all of it easily snipped and posted on social media. The hearings made for great television and, probably more important, great memes, the TikTokification of testimony. "Like our hearings, this report is designed to deliver our findings



The January 6th report says much about Trump's "Big Lie" but little about why so many believed it.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANSON CHAN

in detail in a format that is accessible for all Americans," Liz Cheney, the committee's vice-chair, writes in a foreword to the written report. But the report, unlike the hearings, is dreary, repetitive, and exhausting. In that sense, it's like Trump himself. It's also surprisingly scanty in the key elements of storytelling—setting, character, and plot. It's as if the committee found itself unable to surmount Trump's madness and senselessness, trapped in his very plotlessness.



The report doesn't lack for details, which consist mainly of running down and debunking bogus claims about dead voters, shredded ballots, dumped votes, voting machines linked to Hugo Chávez, a faked water-main rupture, suitcases full of ballots, U.S.B. drives, truckloads of ballots in garbage bins, unmarked vans, a Dominion voting machine connected to China by way of a smart thermostat, and some guy meddling with the election from inside a prison in Italy. There are inconsequential but "Veep"-worthy revelations: an Oath Keeper calling followers of QAnon "Q-tards," and Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, at the rally at the Ellipse on January 6th, asked whether he would march to the Capitol, answering, "Hell, no. It's freezing." Antics abound: Rudy Giuliani (who is now facing disbarment) holding a press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping; Ivanka and Jared fretting, uselessly; a Proud Boys subcommittee calling itself the Ministry of Self-Defense entertaining a proposal from South Florida cryptocurrency investors that refers to the planned attack on the Capitol as operation Storm the Winter Palace, a reference to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution (leading the report's authors to huff, "No historical event has been less American"). At one point, Trump supporters in Michigan plan to hide out in the state's capitol overnight, so that, in the morning, they can sign an elector certificate that, by law, has to be signed in that building. Not for nothing did William Barr, the Attorney General at the time, refer to Trump's legal team as the "clown car." It's all so madcap and vaudevillian that, if the stakes weren't so high, and the matter at hand not so grave, it would be the Marx Brothers in "Night at the White House."

But the stakes *are* high; they tower. Trump might get reëlected. Or he might get indicted. Both could happen. Even if he were to die tomorrow, the attempt to overturn the election would require an accounting of its deeper roots in American political behavior and discourse, of the anti-government takeover of the G.O.P., and of the role played by the hundred and forty-seven Republicans who, in the early morning of January 7, 2021, only hours after the Capitol had been cleared of rioters, voted against certifying the results of the election. The siege of the building is, in the end, the least of it. The Department of Justice has so far filed criminal charges against more than nine hundred people who participated in the insurrection, of whom nearly five hundred have either pleaded guilty or been convicted. The January 6th Report makes eight criminal referrals, recommending that the Department of Justice prosecute the former President (and in some cases other people) for crimes that include obstruction of an official proceeding, conspiracy to defraud the United States, and incitement or assistance of insurrection, the charge for which Trump was impeached in January, 2021. Much turns on the reception of this report. As a brief for the prosecution, it's a start. As a book, it's essential if miserable reading. As history, it's a shambles.

Investigatory committees and commissions began to multiply about a century ago, with the rise of the administrative state and the extension of executive power. Their purpose is chiefly to hold bureaucrats and elected officials and, especially, the executive branch accountable for wrongdoing. It wasn't clear, at first, whether these commissions were constitutional. That question was resolved in 1927, when, in McGrain v. Daugherty, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a conviction for contempt of the brother of the Attorney General, who had refused to appear before a Senate committee investigating the Teapot Dome scandal. The investigatory commission proliferated during the Progressive Era, and has origins in "race riot" commissions like the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, established in 1919 by the governor of Illinois "to get the facts and interpret them and to find a way out," or, as Lyndon B. Johnson put it, when charging the Kerner Commission with investigating "civil disorders" half a century later, "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?"

These same questions animate the January 6th investigation, and a case can be made that the insurrection was, among other things, a race riot—a white race riot. But the committee has not taken as its model the race-riot report. Instead, the report is indebted to earlier investigations into attacks on the United States, a kinship suggested by the committee's preference for the word "attack" over the word "insurrection," as if it came from without. "I don't know if you want to use the word 'insurrection,' 'coup,' whatever," a White House staffer told the committee. The committee knew which word it wanted to use.

Congress ordered the select committee to "investigate and report upon the facts, circumstances, and causes" of the attack on the Capitol. The charge borrows its language from investigations into earlier attacks on the United States. On December 18, 1941, eleven days after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, F.D.R. appointed a commission "to ascertain and report the facts relating to the attack." In 1963, after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Lyndon B. Johnson directed the Warren Commission "to evaluate all the facts and circumstances surrounding the assassination," which, at the time, many suspected to have been a covert operation coördinated by the K.G.B., given that Lee Harvey Oswald had defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. In 2002, Congress charged the 9/11 Commission with determining the "facts and circumstances relating to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001." Each investigated failures within the federal government, especially failures of intelligence, but each looked, too, to foreign actors.

If you're going to report on the facts, circumstances, and causes of an event, the natural way to do it is to write a story that is both painstakingly researched and kept kissing-close to the evidence—a story, in other words, that is also a history. A history has to be true, to the best of your knowledge at the time of the writing, and it ought to be riveting. The Warren Commission Report (1964) reads like a mystery novel: "In the corner house itself, Mrs. Barbara Jeanette Davis and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Virginia Davis, heard the shots and rushed to the door in time to see the man walk rapidly across the lawn shaking a revolver as if he were emptying it of cartridge cases." The Starr Report (1998), an investigation of a real-estate deal that ended up exposing Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, often reads like porn: "In the course of flirting with him, she raised her jacket in the back and showed him the straps of her thong underwear, which extended above her pants." The 9/11 Commission Report (2004) reads like an international thriller: "Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. . . . In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run. For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine." The January 6th Report reads like a prosecuting attorney's statement to a jury: "President Trump's decision to declare victory falsely on election night and, unlawfully, to call for the vote counting to stop, was not a spontaneous decision. It was premeditated." A page-turner it is not.

The reports of earlier investigatory commissions have been mixed successes. The Warren Report, which concluded that Oswald acted alone, is notorious, since it did little to halt the flowering of conspiracy theories involving everything from the Mafia to Martians. "We are looking to you, not to approve our own notions, but to guide us and to guide the country through a thicket of tension, conflicting evidence, and extreme opinion," L.B.J. told the Kerner Commission. But, when the report came in, the President refused even to accept a copy. The Starr Report is just plain embarrassing.

Reports of investigatory commissions don't age well: as is the case with all historical analysis, more evidence always comes out later. Still, some reports are better than others. The 9/11 Commission Report was a finalist for the National Book Award. In an "authorized" edition published by W. W. Norton, the report was also an unexpected best-seller. As with the January 6th Report, which is available from several different publishers as a book—including an edition co-published by this magazine—you could get the 9/11 report free online, but people bought it anyway. *Time* described it as "one of the most riveting, disturbing and revealing accounts of crime, espionage and the inner workings of government ever written." The *Times Book Review* called it "an improbable literary triumph."

Families of the victims, not members of Congress, had demanded the formation of the 9/11 Commission, which consisted of five Democrats and five Republicans (none of whom were current members of Congress). The architects of the report were two professors of history—the commission's executive director, Philip D. Zelikow, and a senior adviser, Ernest R. May—who had taught courses together and had also collaborated on a book, "The Kennedy Tapes." May, a Harvard professor (and a colleague of mine until his death, in 2009), wanted to reinvent the genre. "Typically, government reports focus on 'findings' and array the evidence accordingly," he explained. "None, to our knowledge, had ever attempted simply to produce professional-quality narrative history." This is what May set out to do—he wanted to create "enduringly readable history"—and it's not only the report's narrative structure but also its sense of historical time that endows it with both immediacy and lastingness.

The historical narrative is the first eleven chapters of a thirteen-chapter report. There is no two-hundred-page executive summary. There is no executive summary at all, or any list of findings. There is, instead, a taut, three-page preface, and then the story begins, the "story of eccentric and violent ideas sprouting in the fertile ground of political and social turmoil."

The 9/11 report has plenty of flaws, as May was the first to admit. "For one thing, the report skirts the question of whether American policies and actions fed the anger that manifested itself on September 11," he wrote in *The New Republic* in 2005. For another, because some members of the commission and its staff had worked at national-security agencies, "collective drafting led to the introduction of passages that offset criticism of an agency with words of praise. Not all these words were deserved." Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush got off even easier than the C.I.A., the F.B.I., and the N.S.A. What May was hinting at is illustrated in a thirty-one-page document declassified only this fall, a "memorandum for the record" of a meeting between Bush and the commissioners in which the commissioners repeatedly pressed Bush on whether he knew, in the summer of 2001, about the threat posed by Al Qaeda. Bush said he'd been briefed only about "threats overseas." This was a lie. He'd been warned about specific threats to the United States. Nowhere in the commission's final report—released in July, 2004, less than four months before a Presidential election—is the President implicated. If he had been, he might not have been reëlected. "Our aim has not been to assign individual blame," reads the preface, written by the bipartisan commission's co-chairs. Instead, they hoped to provide an explanation.

May wanted the 9/11 report to "transcend the passions of the moment," and it did. He hoped it might serve as a model for future reports. "In these perilous times, there will surely be other events that will require the principles of historiography allied to the resources of government, so that urgency will sometimes become the friend of truth." This is the bar that was set for members of the January 6th Committee. Their report does not clear that bar. Not because the report isn't accurate but because it hasn't achieved escape velocity from the leaden passions of the present.

Here, radically reduced—forty gallons of sap to one gallon of maple syrup—is a very un-executive summary of the report. Donald Trump never said he'd abide by the outcome of the election. In May of 2020, fearing that Biden might win in November, he tweeted, "It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history!" He understood that he would likely lose but that, owing to an effect known as the Red Mirage, it would look, for a while, as if he had won: more Democrats than Republicans would vote by mail and, since mail-in ballots are often the last to be counted, early counting would favor Republicans. "When that happens," Roger Stone advised him, "the key thing to do is to claim victory. . . . No, we won. Fuck you, Sorry. Over."

That was Plan A. In September, *The Atlantic* published a bombshell article by Barton Gellman reporting that the Trump campaign had a scheme "to bypass election results and appoint loyal electors in battleground states where Republicans hold the legislative majority." That was Plan B. Plan A ("Fuck you") was more Trump's style. "He's gonna declare victory," Steve Bannon said. "But that doesn't mean he's the winner. He's just gonna say he's a winner." On Election Night, November 3rd, Trump wanted to do just that, but his campaign team persuaded him not to. His patience didn't last long. "This is a fraud on the American public," Trump said on November 4th. "We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election." The next day, he tweeted, "STOP THE COUNT!" On November 7th, CNN, NBC, MSNBC, ABC, the Associated Press, and Fox News all declared that Joseph Biden had won. The election was not close. Counting the votes just took a while.

After Biden won, Trump continued to insist that widespread fraud had been committed. Bill Stepien, Trump's campaign manager, told the January 6th Committee that the campaign became a "truth telling squad," chasing allegations, discovering them to be unfounded, and telling the President, "Yeah, that wasn't true." The Department of Homeland Security looked into allegations, most of which popped up online, and announced, "There is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised." The Justice Department, too, investigated charges of fraud, but, as Barr informed the committee, he was left telling the President, repeatedly, "They're not panning out."

For Plan C, the President turned to Rudy Giuliani and a group of lawyers that included Sidney Powell. They filed sixty-two lawsuits challenging election results, and lost all but one of these suits (and that one involved neither allegations of fraud nor any significant number of votes). Twenty-two of the judges who decided these cases had been appointed by Republicans, and ten had been appointed by Trump.

On December 11th, the Supreme Court rejected a suit that had challenged the results in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Trump had had every right to challenge the results of state elections, but at this point he had exhausted his legal options. He decided to fall back on Plan B, the fake-electors plan, which required hundreds of legislators across the country to set aside the popular vote in states won by Biden, claiming that the results were fraudulent, and appointing their own slate of electors, who would cast their Electoral College votes for Trump on December 14th. According to Cassidy Hutchinson, an aide to Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, the White House counsel determined that, since none of the fraud allegations had been upheld by any court, the fake-electors plan was illegal. But one deputy assistant to the President told Trump that it didn't matter whether there had been fraud or not, because "state legislators 'have the constitutional right to substitute their judgment for a certified majority of their constituents' if that prevents socialism."

Plan B required Trump to put pressure on a lot of people. The committee counted at least two hundred attempts he made to influence state or local officials by phone, text, posts, or public remarks. Instructing Trump supporters to join in, Giuliani said, "Sometimes it even requires being threatened." A Trump-campaign spreadsheet documents efforts to contact more than a hundred and ninety Republican state legislators in Arizona, Georgia, and Michigan alone.

Barr resigned. "I didn't want to be part of it," he told the committee. Plenty of other people were happy to be part of it, though. Ronna McDaniel, the R.N.C. chair, participated and provided Trump with the assistance of R.N.C. staffers. On December 14th, certified electors met in every state. In seven states that Biden had won—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—fake electors also met and produced counterfeit Electoral College certificates for Trump. Five of these certificates were sent to Washington but were rejected because they lacked the required state seal; two arrived after the deadline. None were accepted.

Trump then launched Plan D, which was not so much a plan as a pig's breakfast of a conspiracy, a coup, and a putsch. Everything turned on January 6th, the day a joint session of Congress was to certify the results of the Electoral College vote. To stop that from happening, Trump recruited members of Congress into a conspiracy to overturn the election by rejecting the certified votes and accepting the counterfeits; he asked the Vice-President to participate in a coup by simply declaring him the winner; and he incited his supporters to take over the Capitol by force, in a poorly planned putsch, which he intended to lead. On December 17th, Kayleigh McEnany said on Fox News, "There has been an alternate slate of electors voted upon that Congress will decide in January." Two days later, Trump tweeted, "Big protest in D.C. On January 6th. Be there, will be wild." The legal architect of the Pence part of the pig's breakfast—"a coup in search of a legal theory," as one federal judge called it—was a lawyer named John Eastman. The Trump lawyer Eric Herschmann recalled a conversation he had with Eastman:

> You're saying you believe the Vice President, acting as President of the Senate, can be the sole decisionmaker as to, under your theory, who becomes the next President of the United States? And he said, yes. And I said, are you out of your Fing mind?

Trump pressed the acting Attorney General, Jeffrey Rosen, and other members of the Department of Justice to aid the conspiracy by declaring some of the voting to have been fraudulent. Rosen refused. "The D.O.J. can't and won't snap its fingers and change the outcome of the election," he told Trump. Trump replied, "I don't expect you to do that. Just say the election was corrupt and leave the rest to me and the Republican Congressmen." Trump tried to replace Rosen with a lackey named Jeffrey Clark, but, in a tense meeting at the White House on January 3rd, Rosen and others made clear to him that, if he did so, much of the department would resign. Trump and Eastman met repeatedly with Pence in the Oval Office and tried to recruit him into the conspiracy. Pence refused. At 11:20 A.M. on January 6th, Trump called Pence and again asked him, and again Pence refused, after which, according to Ivanka, the President called the Vice-President a pussy.

Trump was slated to speak at his bewild rally at the Ellipse at noon, but when he arrived he was unhappy about the size of the crowd. The Secret Service had set up magnetometers, known as mags, to screen for weapons. Twenty-eight thousand people went through the mags, from whom the Secret Service collected, among other banned items, “269 knives or blades, 242 canisters of pepper spray, 18 brass knuckles, 18 tasers, 6 pieces of body armor, 3 gas masks, 30 batons or blunt instruments.” Some people had ditched their bags, and presumably their weapons, in trees or cars. In a crowd that included members of white-supremacist and far-right, anti-government extremist groups—including the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, America First, and QAnon—another twenty-five thousand people simply refused to go through the mags. “I don’t fucking care that they have weapons,” Trump shouted. “They’re not here to hurt *me*. Take the fucking mags away.” The mags stayed. Trump took to the podium and fired up his followers for the march to the Capitol until 1:10 P.M., and then he walked to his motorcade, climbed into the Presidential S.U.V., which is known as the Beast, and demanded to be driven to the Capitol. Secret Service agents persuaded him to return to the White House.

Just before the Joint Session was to begin, at one o’clock, Pence released a written statement: “I do not believe that the Founders of our country intended to invest the Vice President with unilateral authority to decide which electoral votes should be counted during the Joint Session of Congress.” The voting began. By 1:21, Trump had been informed that the Capitol was under attack. He spent the rest of the day watching it on television. For hours, his staff and his advisers begged him to order the mob to disperse or to call for military assistance; he refused. At 1:46, Representative Paul Gosar objected to the count from Arizona, after which Senator Ted Cruz endorsed that objection. Pence was evacuated at 2:12. Seconds later, Proud Boys achieved the first breach of the Capitol, smashing a window in the Senate wing. Eleven minutes later, the mob broke through the doors to the East Rotunda, and Trump tweeted, “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done.” The mob chanted, “Hang Mike Pence.” Meadows told a colleague, “He thinks Mike deserves it.” Kevin McCarthy called the President. “They literally just came through my office windows,” he said. “You need to call them off.” Trump said, “Well, Kevin, I guess they’re just more upset about the election theft than you are.” At 4:17 P.M., the President released a video message in which he asked the insurrectionists to go home, and told them that he loved them.

And that, in brief, is the report, which concludes that “the central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump.” And that, in brief, is the problem: chasing Trump, never quite untethering itself from him, fluttering in the biting wind of his violent derangement, like a ribbon pinned to the tail of a kite during a tornado, and failing, entirely, to see the tornado.

In the January 6th Report, Donald Trump acted alone and came out of nowhere. He has no past. Neither does the nation. The rest of the country doesn’t even exist. No one dies of COVID, no one loses a job, no one sinks to her knees in grief upon hearing on the radio the news that Americans—*Americans*—are staging an armed invasion of the Capitol. Among the many reasons this investigation ought to have been conducted by a body independent from the federal government is that there is very little suffering in Congress’s January 6th Report, except that of members of Congress running for their lives that day.

The report is organized around the idea of the “Big Lie,” which is the title of the report’s first chapter. “The Big Lie” is what Democratic politicians and many journalists call Trump’s claim that he had won the election. (It is also an expression first notably used by Adolf Hitler.) It is an inept phrase: it turns an attempted coup d’état into something that sounds like a children’s book written by Margaret Wise Brown. “The Big Lie” is so ham-handed that, unsurprisingly, it’s an expression that Trump adores. “The Fraudulent Presidential Election of 2020

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will be, from this day forth, known as THE BIG LIE!" he announced at one point. Playing "You lie!" "No, you lie!" with Donald Trump is a fool's game.

"The Big Lie" is not a big lie. It is an elaborate fiction, an artful story, with heroes and villains, exotic locales, and a sinister plot. *The election was stolen by a cabal of Democrats, socialists, immigrants, criminals, Black people, and spies*. This story is vicious and idiotic, and none of it is true, but it is not a Big Lie devised by an orange-haired supervillain born rich in 1946: it is the latest chapter in a fictive counter-history of the United States which has been told by the far right for decades and decades and wretched decades. In 2020, it gained so much speed so fast that it acted something like a stampede. Unfortunately, reading the report is like being in the stampede. "The stolen election narrative has proven to be remarkably durable precisely because it is a matter of belief—not evidence, or reason," the report states. It does not ask why this should be. Why believe? Two in five Americans and three in five Republicans *still* believe. Republicans who most fiercely believe hold the Party by the throat. The 9/11 Commission Report asked, "How did Bin Ladin—with his call for indiscriminate killing of Americans—win thousands of followers and some degree of approval from millions more?" The January 6th Committee Report, for all its weight and consequence, never asks why anyone believed Donald Trump, which is why it is unlikely to persuade anyone not to.

Why believe? Answering that question would have required a historical vantage on the decay of the party system, the celebration of political intolerance by both the right and the left, the contribution of social media to political extremism, and the predicament of American journalism. Calling the system rigged when you're losing is an old trick. At the end of the Cold War, American zealots turned their most ruthless ideological weapons on one another, Manicheans all. In 1992, Newt Gingrich told Republican candidates to get the message out that the Democrats were going to rig the Presidential election. It didn't matter to Gingrich that this wasn't true. "They're going to buy registrations, they're going to buy votes," he warned. "They're going to turn out votes, they're going to steal votes, they're going to do anything they can." After the contested Bush v. Gore election, of 2000, sowing doubt about elections became common practice for outsiders in both parties. "The system is rigged" was the watchword of Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaign: primaries rigged against challengers, the economy rigged against working people. Suspecting that things like elections might be rigged, even when that's not true, isn't a crazy conspiracy theory; it is a political product routinely sold to voters in every city and state in the country.

Why believe? In the past two decades, public approval of Congress has fallen from eighty per cent to twenty per cent. Might it be that Congress has lost any real grip on the American experience, and no longer speaks for a nation and a people that Richard Hofstadter once called a "huge, inarticulate beast"? The report lacks not only a sense of the past but also a meaningful sense of the present. A chronicle that runs from April, 2020, to January, 2021, it is a story told out of time. The "facts, circumstances, and causes" relating to the insurrection that it fails to investigate and, in most cases, even to note, include COVID-19 deaths, masks, lockdowns, joblessness, farm closures, guns and mass shootings, a national mental-health crisis, daily reports of devastating storms and fires, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, and partisan, and especially congressional, eye-gouging over each and every one of the items in this list. Why believe? Was the election stolen? No. But was 2020 painful? Yes.

Why believe? Nowhere acknowledged in the report is the fact that November 3, 2020, really was a weird Election Day. In the middle of a pandemic, unprecedented numbers of people voted by mail and by absentee ballot, and, even if you trudged out to the polls, you were met with the general misery of masks and loneliness and loss and, for many people, a sense of impending doom. For the entire stretch of time chronicled in this report, it felt to many Americans, not always for the same reasons, as though a great deal was being stolen from them: their jobs, their co-workers, a sense of justice and fairness in the world, predictable weather, the idea of America, the people they love, human touch. The January 6th Report offers no shuddering sense, not even a little shiver, of the national mood of vulnerability, fear, and sorrow. "The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, was a cruel and shocking act of violence directed against a man, a family, a nation, and against all mankind," the Warren Commission Report opens. Nothing in the January 6th report is stated so squarely.

Why believe? During the pandemic, more people spent more time online than ever before. The report fails to examine the way in which Facebook and Twitter profited by spreading misinformation about the election, providing the organizational architecture for the insurrection, and making possible the doxing and harassment of courageous and dedicated public servants who refused to participate in the conspiracy. When Trump staffers tell him that allegations of fraud are unfounded, he replies, "You guys may not be following the internet the way I do." Nor did the committee.

Why believe? Every single television and news outlet that reported live on Election Day, 2020, knew about the Red Mirage, and although some news anchors regularly pointed out that the outcome would not be known for days, they were nevertheless complicit in promoting the fiction of a Trump victory: simply by reporting, second by second, on November 3, 2020, they endorsed the idea that the outcome could be known that night even though they knew it to be untrue. The committee does not remark on this. Nor does it indict the media-run polls and horse-race coverage—vastly greater in number, speed, and influence than ever before, or the growing partisanship of the press. Nor does it inquire into the consequences of an educated national élite of politicians, journalists, and academics increasingly living their lives in a Met Gala to Davos to White House Correspondents' Dinner world, or the degree to which so many of them appear to have so wholly given themselves over to Twitter—knowing the world through it, reporting from it, being ruled by it.

Why believe? The answer to that question—the knowledge of what has happened to America—will have to wait for another day. From beneath the Capitol dome, the January 6th Committee has issued its report. It blames Trump. It explains very little. Outside, the whirling wind heaves and twists and roars. ♦

BOOKS

DEEP CUTS

Franz Kafka's diaries reveal a writer who was antic as well as agonized.

BY BECCA ROTHFELD

Literature usually reaches us in its finished form, when it has already ossified into irrevocability. By the time a book is bound and printed, it is easy to forget that the words were once in motion. Franz Kafka's fitful fiction provides a reminder. Most of his work was published posthumously, through the efforts of his best friend, Max Brod, and much of it still bears the marks of its author's uncertainty. Kafka finished none of the three novels he started, and his final attempt, "The Castle," leaves off abruptly midsentence.

Not only are Kafka's fictions incomplete; many of them also contain meditations on the impossibility of completion. A messenger in one of his stories travels through one antechamber after another without ever reaching the person to whom his message is addressed. A lawyer in Kafka's second novel, "The Trial," drafts and redrafts a petition that is "never finished," and a character in "The Castle" wonders, as he clambers toward the fortress of the title, "Could this path be endless?" If Kafka's works are as endless as the path to the Castle, it is because they teem with potent indeterminacies. In these "fairy tales for dialecticians," as Walter Benjamin once called them, rules are enforced, then revoked; principles are established, then contravened. The behavior of a bureaucrat from the Castle can "mean that the official procedure has begun, but it can also mean that the official procedure has not yet even begun." Defendants in "The Trial" spend hours mired in Talmudic debates about the conduct of court officials, all without coming to any consensus about what it signifies. They know they live in a world of omens, but they cannot begin to fathom what the omens mean. Before they are found guilty, much less sentenced, they are already condemned to a hell of eternal interpretation.

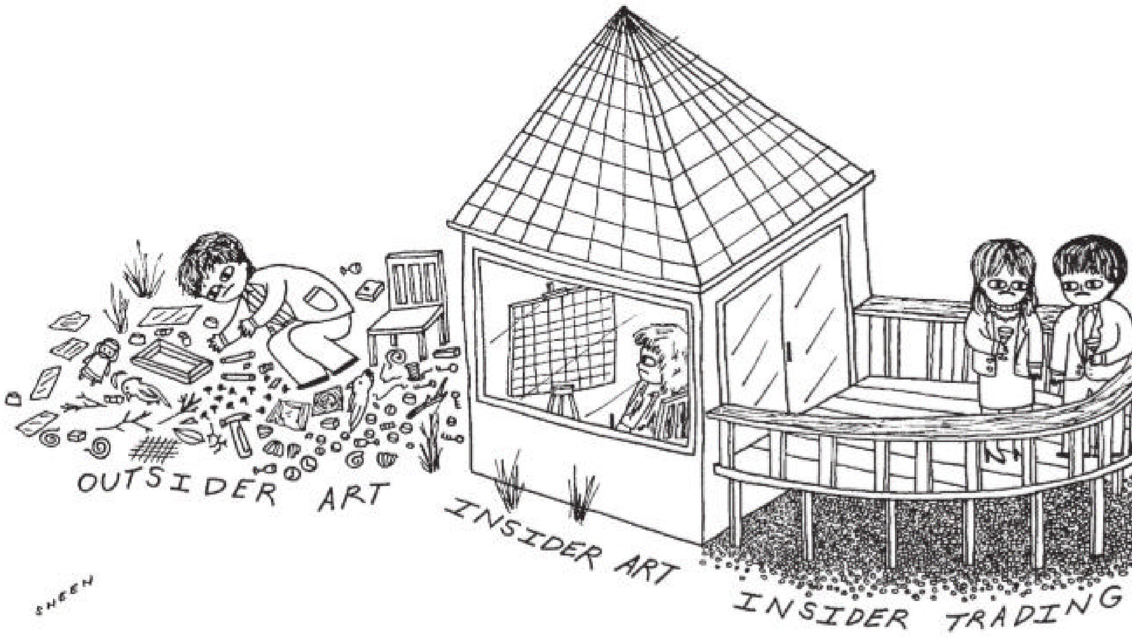
It's appropriate that an incompletionist as consummate as Kafka also kept diaries—documents that cannot come to a close until the life they chronicle is over, and that need never be burnished into products fit to publish. Although he occasionally worked in bursts, almost every word he set down in these diaries was once contested, and his twelve private notebooks (along with four sets of notes from his travels) are indices of elaborate indecision. Drafts are attempted, then aborted; passages are reiterated and ruthlessly reworked.

Ross Benjamin's momentous new translation, "The Diaries of Franz Kafka" (Schocken), is the first to convey the full extent of their twitchy tenuousness. Martin Greenberg and Joseph Kresh's previous rendering, published in 1948 and 1949, did no such thing: the manuscript on which it is based had been heavily doctored by Brod, likely in an effort to protect both Kafka's reputation and his own. In the vandalized diaries, entries have been shuffled into a linear chronology, lewd and lightly homoerotic content has been excised, solecisms have been corrected, dialect has been rigidified into strenuously proper High German, punctuation has been inserted, drafts and revisions of stories have been removed so as to impose an artificial distinction between fiction and fact, and passages unflattering to Brod have been cut. The result is prim and polished, less like a diary and more like a monument. The unadulterated Kafka, in the new version, is less stilted and more alive. Kafka neglects to finish sentences and sometimes even breaks off mid-word. Many of his entries are undated, and occasionally long periods pass between one jotting and the next.

The diaries, then, are dually incomplete, both because they are unedited and

Obsessed with embodiment, Kafka could write about literature in carnal terms.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHA HUIGEN



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because of all the biographical staples that they omit. Someone who lacked prior knowledge of Kafka's life could easily come away from them with next to no sense of the major events that defined him. The notebooks begin in 1909, when their author was twenty-five, and end in 1923, a year before his death. Entire monographs have traced the convolutions of Kafka's doomed relationship with Felice Bauer—to whom he was engaged, then unengaged, then re-engaged, then unengaged for good—but Kafka's diary entries about her can be deceptively dry and cursory. "Wrote letter to F. in the office," he notes. Several days later, "Letter from F." Julie Wohryzek, the tubercular clerk to whom he was less eventfully and more briefly engaged, appears only a handful of times, in exaggeratedly truncated notes. ("Walked up and down with J.," "Silent with J.") Several times, Kafka mentions Milena Jesenská-Pollak, the free-spirited Czech translator with whom he exchanged more than a hundred letters, but he abbreviates her to "M" and reduces their romance to a blip. Dora Diamant, the woman with whom he started an anomalously wholesome and uncomplicated relationship in the last year of his life, is entirely absent.

As for the oblique references to crucial occurrences that do pepper the diaries, they are impossible to identify, much less understand, without the benefit of background information. At one point, Kafka writes, "No telegram came." Who could infer from this placid pronouncement that its author was in agony as he awaited an important reply from Felice? "Back from Berlin," Kafka notes later. "Was bound like a criminal. If one had sat me down in a corner with real chains and placed policemen in front of me and let me watch only in this way, it would not have been worse. And it was my engagement." A reader might be forgiven for failing to recognize that Kafka is describing not a tribunal but a nominally happy occasion—an engagement party organized by Felice's family.

We cannot understand these entries without context, much of it helpfully supplied by the new translation's copious endnotes, but, by the same token, we cannot understand Kafka's context without consulting his diaries. No one could guess at the circumstances of his engagement on the basis of his notebooks alone, but no one could have any idea how unendurable he found an ostensible celebration if he had not, in writing, likened it to a prison. For Kafka, the relationship between word and world was symbiotic: literature was an appendage to life, but life was flat and senseless without the embellishments of literature.

"I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else": Kafka's famously draconian assertion is from a draft of a letter written to Felice's father, the mailed version of which Felice intercepted and did not pass on. The formulation is memorable, but it is not true. Kafka was, in addition to literature, a person with a history, a family, and a body. Once, he had even been a baby.

He was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague, then in the Austro-Hungarian province of Bohemia. Formerly a cultural capital, the city had long since surrendered its prestige to sleek Vienna and gritty Berlin. The teen-age Kafka grumbled in a letter to a friend that "Prague doesn't let go. . . . This old crone has claws." The complaint proved prophetic: despite his many attempts to flee, he managed to move for only a short period during the last year of his life.

In the Bohemia that Kafka could never escape, tensions between the German-speaking minority and the Czech-speaking majority simmered and periodically boiled over into riots. Kafka was fluent in both languages—but as a Jew he was painfully aware that he belonged to neither camp. Although he wrote his great works in crystalline German, he reflects in his diaries, "I have not always loved my mother as much as she deserved and as I could only because the German language hindered me from doing so. The Jewish mother is no 'Mutter,' the designation Mutter makes her a little odd."

Kafka was never especially pious, but he nonetheless took his cultural affinities seriously. He dabbled in Zionism, studied Hebrew, and went out of his way to befriend the members of a Yiddish theatre troupe that passed through Prague. Though his fiction makes no explicit allusion to the plight of his people in particular, it is full of perennial outsiders and senseless persecutions that cannot but recall the trials of the rural Jews from whom he was only one generation removed.

After all, Kafka's parents hailed from small towns in the countryside and attained bourgeois respectability and mainstream acceptance only when they opened a fancy-goods store in the heart of the city. No wonder they were so flummoxed by their obstinately impractical son, who refused to take an interest in the business. As he wrote in that intercepted letter to Felice's father, "I live within my family, among the kindest, most affectionate people—and am more strange than a stranger."

He was equally estranged from his source of income: convinced of the wisdom of keeping his vocation rigidly isolated from his profession, the young Kafka opted to pursue a doctorate in law, which he once characterized as "a kind of intellectual sawdust that thousands of others' mouths had already chewed up for me." He may have gagged on this flavorless fare, but it helped him secure a post with unusually humane hours at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. From 1908 to 1922, he spent his mornings and afternoons pressuring reluctant businesses to insure their employees against accidents on the job, answering correspondence from disgruntled workers, and writing promotional materials about the importance of workplace safety. He excelled at these tasks, but he did not enjoy them, and he resented every second that he wasted in the office. The regimen he tried and often failed to maintain was gruelling: work in the daytime, rest in the evening, hours of writing all night. During the fourteen years that Kafka languished in the civil service, he was engaged twice to Felice and once to Julie, but he was loyal above all to the secret life he led when everyone else was sleeping. In the end, he never married. He could commit completely to nothing but literature.

But Kafka did not spend all his time in bed, at his desk, or insuring accident-prone workers. He also met regularly with his circle of friends, travelled widely, and became an apostle of *Lebensreform*, a health fad that fetishized supposedly natural methods. In accordance with *Lebensreform* principles, he followed a strict vegetarian diet and kept his windows open to facilitate airflow. Each day, he performed a fifteen-minute exercise routine, and he irritated his tablemates by fastidiously "Fletcherizing" his food—chewing it until it had liquefied, per the system pioneered by the health faddist Horace Fletcher, a.k.a. "the Great Masticator." Kafka believed that the cold would vitalize him and boasted that he walked until he could not feel his fingers, and twice he vacationed at health spas. He often embarked on weekend hiking excursions in the nearby countryside and, on a couple of occasions, arranged to garden in the suburbs. Above all, he loved swimming and sought the water at every possible opportunity, frequenting the Prague docks in the summer and taking trips to picturesque lakes whenever he had the chance.

On top of all this, Kafka found the time to write and publish regularly enough to garner modest recognition. His two collections of short prose received admiring reviews, one of which compared his work favorably with that of Thomas Mann, and a smattering of his stories appeared in newspapers and literary journals. Robert Musil, then an editor at an illustrious publisher, was so impressed with Kafka's output that he begged the young writer to contribute to the imprint's in-house magazine. But Kafka knew it would take a novel to launch him to true celebrity, and he was too much of a perfectionist to complete one without years of agonizing, self-loathing, and second-guessing. By the time he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, in 1917, he had been chipping away at two longer works for several years. He embarked on a final attempt in 1922. As his condition worsened, he remained convinced that all three efforts were failures, and he instructed Brod to destroy the drafts after his death. In 1924, exactly one month before his forty-first birthday, his strength gave out for good. It was not long before his best friend set out to defy his dying wish.

This, then, was Kafka's life. Both its plot and its daily textures are curiously absent from his private reflections. His diaries contain several stray autobiographical divulgences, mostly about his childhood, but they are for the most part surprisingly impersonal. So what fills their pages?

In place of memoir, we find accounts of Kafka's dreams (which are as dull as anyone else's), notes on books he is reading (including several pages on a history of Napoleon's defeat in Russia), summaries of plays and performances (which Kafka is capable of enjoying even when he recognizes that they are cheesy), and inscrutable snatches that even the volume's scrupulous endnotes cannot demystify ("only the billowing overcoat endures, everything else is contrived"). Kafka commends Kleist and Goethe, disparages Dickens, grapples with studies of Judaism, and meditates on the differences between theatre and the novel. Memoirs, biographies, and collections of letters fascinate him, as if he can imbibe reality only when it has been committed to the page.

Fittingly, he does not bother to cordon fiction off from everything else, and it can be difficult to distinguish his literary assays from his daydreams. Beginnings tantalize and sometimes swell into proto-stories, which then peter out without warning. In one of them, the narrator announces, "I wanted to read, but my neighbor broke the door in two with an axe." In another, the narrator, having fallen asleep, fails to keep an appointment with his friends. When they come to rouse him, he tells us,

> I was very startled, jumped out of the bed and attended to nothing but getting ready as quickly as possible. When I stepped out the door fully dressed, my friends backed away from me in apparent fright. "What do you have behind your head" they cried. Ever since I had woken up I had felt something hindering me from leaning my head back and now I groped with my hand for this hindrance. My friends, having pulled themselves together a little, cried "Be careful, don't hurt yourself" just as I grasped the hilt of a sword behind my head.

This particular piece never reappears, but many similar fragments are reworked and regurgitated with minor revisions, often in the course of several years. Six times Kafka fiddles with a sketch about the adverse effects of education, which he ultimately abandons. Occasionally, there are first drafts of full works, including "The Judgment," the story that Kafka completed in a surge of ecstasy in a single night.

Aside from these forays into fiction, the diaries' most arresting writing is clinically visual. Kafka's many meticulous descriptions of acquaintances, strangers, and urban tableaux are as cruelly observant as a portrait by Lucian Freud. "Artless transition from the taut skin of my boss's bald head to the delicate wrinkles of his forehead," one reads. "An obvious, quite easily imitated failing of nature, bank notes should not be made in such a way." A Yiddish actor reciting a monologue "clenches the skin of his forehead and of the root of his nose as one believes only hands can be clenched." Kafka writes unsentimentally about his lovers, but he displays incongruous tenderness about striking scenes around the city: at one point, he effuses, "The sight of stairs moves me so much today."

The myth of Kafka as an inveterate melancholic has not prepared us for his endearments toward stairs. From this master of self-flagellation we expect only litanies of miseries and maladies. And the diaries do include their share of obligatory despairing. Kafka takes evident pleasure in posturing as an incurable, and he is unfailingly dramatic about minor infirmities. When he has a headache, it is as if he has "two little boards screwed against my temples"; when he cannot sleep, he feels as if he has laid his head "in a false hole." He was keenly sensitive to sound, and in a short piece later published in a magazine he whines that his bedroom is "the headquarters of the noise of the whole apartment." His letters have much to say about his phobia of mice. As his biographer Reiner Stach so aptly puts it, "For this man absolutely anything could become a problem."

Not that all of Kafka's grievances were so trivial. He certainly had reason to rail against the monotony of his deadening office routine, and it is hard not to sympathize when he laments that his life "resembles the punishment in which the pupil has to write down the same sentence, senseless at least in its repetition, ten times, a hundred times or even more depending on his offense"—except in his case "it's a punishment under the condition 'as many times as you can stand it.'" There are periods when his depression darkens around him so densely that it blots out even the possibility of light: "Some deny the misery by pointing to the sun, he denies the sun by pointing to the misery." The only thing that the dusk could not reach was his writing, or so he was convinced. "When it had become clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction of my being," he confesses, "everything thronged there and left empty all the abilities that were directed toward the pleasures of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection music first and foremost. I wasted away in all these directions." And yet even here, in this wail of anguish, he regards his writing as something writhing in his "organism," in his viscera, not something anemic and apart.

Even the keenest torment can coexist comfortably with a robust appetite for living. Kafka was, like anyone else, a mass of contradictions, and both his letters and his diaries refute the caricature of the writer as a fleshless recluse. If anything, Kafka emerges in the diaries as a surprisingly functional person, subject to the usual vicissitudes of mood. Sometimes he denies the sun, but one day he exults for no apparent reason, "I would like to explain the feeling of happiness that I have within me from time to time as I do right now."

In a letter to Felice, Kafka fantasizes about retreating to a cellar:

> I have often thought that the best mode of life for me would be to sit in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp. Food would be brought and always put down far away from my room, outside the cellar's outermost door.

And yet the diaries reveal that Kafka made no effort to live ascetically. He is busy attending plays and lectures, and, in later years, the newfangled institution of the cinema. Nor was he ever the solitary hermit of his imaginings: "Wonderful evening yesterday with Max. If I love myself, I love him even more strongly." In his notes from a 1911 trip to Paris that he took with Brod, he writes, "How easily grenadine with seltzer goes through one's nose when one laughs."

And Kafka was too devoted a *Lebensreformer* to remain sequestered in a lightless, airless basement. In the diaries, he waxes with uncharacteristic sentimentality after a stroll outside, "On the garden path the goddess of happiness drifts toward you." In an entry from August, 1911, he reports that he does not regret spending the summer swimming rather than writing: "the time that has now gone by, in which I haven't written a word, has been important for me because at the swimming schools in Prague, Königssaal and Czernoschitz I have stopped being ashamed of my body."

Although he never entirely exorcised his distaste for his gaunt physique, he remains so obsessively attentive to the ordeal of embodiment that it is hard to tell whether his form disgusts or delights him. Nowhere is it more apparent that hypochondria is a kind of perverse sensuality than in Kafka's diaries. He wonders how he can "bear" his future "with this body pulled out of a junk room"—but he also marvels over his ear, which is "rough cool juicy to the touch like a leaf." Even pain can be a delicacy: "The pleasure again in imagining a knife twisted in my heart." Often, he thinks with a frisson of chopping and stabbing.

Kafka's fiction is full of animals who resemble people and people who lapse into animality. In "The Metamorphosis," the unfortunate Gregor Samsa regards his old furniture as a reminder of his erstwhile humanity, even in the wake of his transformation into a giant insect who can no longer sit in a chair; in "Investigations of a Dog," the canine narrator endeavors to distinguish himself from the rest of his ravenous species by fasting. The Kafka of the diaries resembles these characters, alternately suppressing and succumbing to his overpowering appetites. Sometimes he is a human who yearns to become an animal, sometimes an animal straining to become a human. "This longing I almost always have, once I feel my stomach is healthy, to heap up in myself fantasies of taking terrible risks with food," he writes hungrily:

> I shove the long rinds of rib meat unbitten into my mouth and then pull them out again from behind tearing through my stomach and intestines. I eat dirty grocery stores completely empty. Fill myself with herrings, pickles and all the bad old sharp foods. Candies are poured into me like hail.

He is no less avid for literature: "indubitable in me is the greed for books. . . . It's as if this greed came from my stomach."

Reading is also carnal, perhaps because Kafka so often spoke the lines of his work aloud, or had friends read them to him: after one such reading, he thinks, "one sentence rubs against the next like the tongue against a hollow or a false tooth." Later, he reads sentences by Goethe "as if I were running along the stresses with my whole body." Even abstractions take on a lush tangibility. Kafka's gifts smart like injuries: he senses his "abilities, as if I were holding them in my hand; they tightened my chest, they inflamed my head." When he squanders his talents on reports and memos at work, he regards the results "with a feeling of disgust and shame as if it were raw meat, cut out of my own flesh."

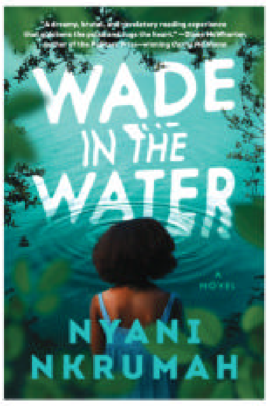
Manifestly, writing was not an intellectual exercise for Kafka; it was a somatic shiver. Sometimes it was a spawning: "The Judgment" came out "like a veritable birth covered with filth and slime." Sometimes it was a wounding: "I will jump into my novella even if it should cut up my face." In one of the most often quoted passages of his letters, he compares great writing to a weapon smashing us open, insisting that "a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us." These are gloriously mixed metaphors, always muscling their way from one image to the next. "I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else" can mean that life is subordinate to literature—but it can also mean that literature is coaxed to breathe and bleed.

Biography bursts into Kafka's art at the level of content. "The Castle" and "The Trial" are full of the sorts of files and bureaucratic inanities that he would have encountered daily at the Accident Insurance Institute, and the workplace inspections that Vice-Secretary Kafka had to conduct probably inspired a bustling hotel scene in his first novel, "The Man Who Disappeared."

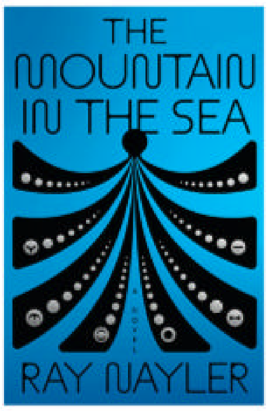
But life also bursts into literature at the level of form, and in Kafka's diaries even the words are acrobatic. As Ross Benjamin notes in the thoughtful introduction to his new translation, his aim is to capture the extent to which the diaries were a "laboratory for Kafka's literary production" and thereby catch the author "in the act of writing." He has succeeded. Everything in the diaries thrashes. From one draft to the next, characters squirm into new shapes. Phrases are mutilated and mangled back together.

One of the most harrowing stories in Kafka's œuvre, "In the Penal Colony," envisions a device that carves the text of broken laws into offenders' skin. The image is brutal but strangely consoling, a dream of wholeness in which there is no distance between description and its object. The victims suffer for hours, but a "look of transfiguration" eventually dawns on each penitent's face. At last, the mute body has been transmogrified into language. The diaries are not unlike Kafka's sinister apparatus. They, too, serve not to disembody life but to embody literature: they are the intimate incisions of an author who could write only by etching words into the flesh. ♦

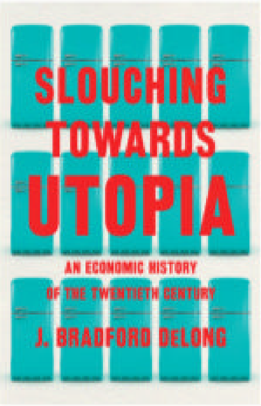
BRIEFLY NOTED



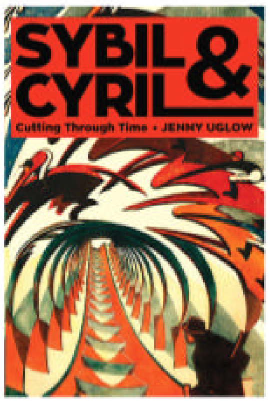
Wade in the Water, *by Nyani Nkrumah (Amistad).* Set in 1982, this immersive début novel is narrated largely by an adolescent girl who lives in an all-Black neighborhood in the fictional town of Ricksville, Mississippi. After a white graduate student moves there to conduct research for a thesis on Black migration and the civil-rights movement, the two begin a cautious friendship. Chapters told from the graduate student's perspective relate a turbulent personal history that includes a stay in a psychiatric hospital and a father who was a Klansman. Though the novel occasionally becomes didactic, Nkrumah resists giving her two main characters a predictable relationship, and her story uncloaks heroes in marvellously unexpected places.



The Mountain in the Sea, *by Ray Nayler (MCD x FSG).* In the near future, at a touristy dive spot off the coast of Con Dao, in Vietnam, a species of extra-intelligent octopuses captures a young diver. The event piques the interest of an ambitious researcher, and soon it becomes clear that the cephalopods, who have a culture and a language of their own, are a violent spawn of the Anthropocene. Nayler moves through his packed plot briskly and often lyrically, pausing on images of animals sparring like children and drones with thoraxes resembling those of dragonflies. He punctuates scenes with the researcher's philosophical insights about interspecies meaning-making and the risks and rewards of cross-cultural communication.



Slouching Towards Utopia, *by J. Bradford DeLong (Basic).* This economic history takes up the period from 1870 to 2010—what its author calls the "long twentieth century"—and examines why, despite the vast wealth generated during that time, problems such as climate change and inequality persist. DeLong, an economics professor, searches for explanations in the work of the period's major political and economic theorists, such as Karl Polanyi and John Maynard Keynes, tracing their ideas' intellectual and practical legacies. If our ancestors could see this era, he imagines, they might marvel at humanity's "technological and organizational powers," but they'd also wonder why we have "done so little to build a truly human world, to approach within sight of any of our utopias."



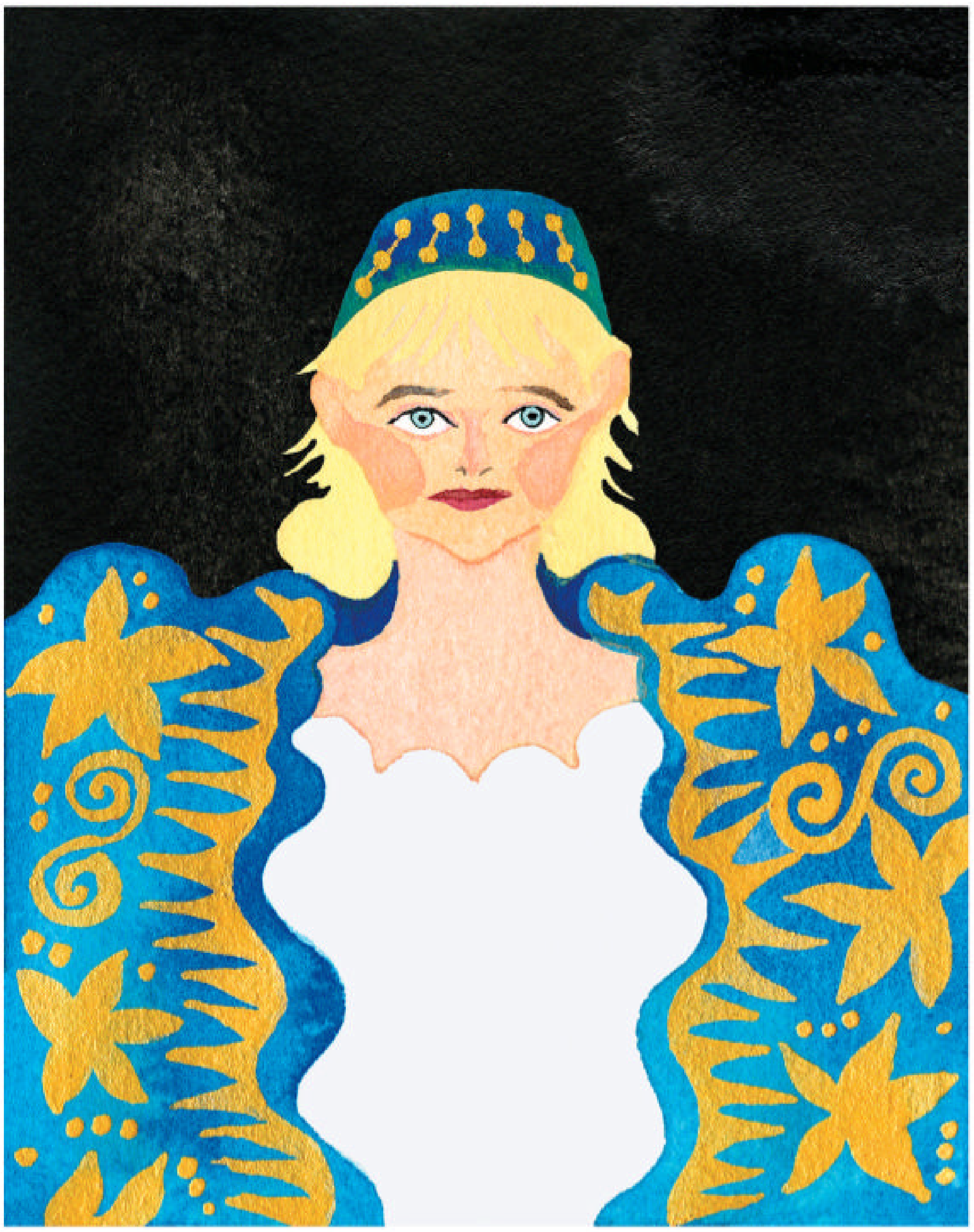
Sybil & Cyril, *by Jenny Uglow (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* This joint biography of the modernist linocut artists Sybil Andrews and Cyril Power is a riveting tale of art and love between the wars. The two first met in Suffolk, England, around 1919, when he was a married father of four and she was an aspiring watercolorist. Their relationship endured for decades, taking them to London, where their experiments with linocutting—a technique Uglow praises for its "radical simplicity"—commenced. What began as a sideline would prove to be the medium through which they realized their shared goal of creating an "art of to-day" that communicated the ethos of modernity. Power's stark, surreal images of London life, Uglow writes, captured the era's "unease," while Andrews's visceral prints of the human form in motion marked a "rebellion" against Victorian prettiness.

THE THEATRE

LANDS OF THE LOST

London's "Orlando," "My Neighbour Totoro," and "The Burnt City."

BY HELEN SHAW



Emma Corrin brings an electric now-ness to the time-travelling Orlando.

Just after Christmas I spent a few greedy, giddy days attending London productions—running through the rain to the Garrick Theatre, in the West End, for "Orlando," then getting baffled by the brutalist maze of the Barbican Center while trying to find "My Neighbour Totoro," and finally zipping out to Punchdrunk's Woolwich storehouses for "The Burnt City." There was no logic to it—my planning was catch-as-catch-can. But the shows all turned out to be portraits of worlds grown suddenly, surprisingly larger, and of the rather lost feeling of the small humans at their center. (In one case, that lost human was me.)

I had been particularly eager to see "Orlando," which slots into the current gender discourse with a nearly audible click. In Neil Bartlett's new adaptation, as in Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, a poetic young aristocrat named Orlando catches the eye of Queen Elizabeth, embarks on various amorous adventures, falls into a coma, and wakes up changed into a woman. In the book, which is styled as a biography, Woolf's narrator tracks Orlando's transformation, and, for a single paragraph, the text's "he" changes to "they," before pivoting to "she." (Woolf wrote, "The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.") The show's gleaming, nonbinary star, Emma Corrin—perhaps best known as the newlywed Princess Diana, from "The Crown"—uses they/them pronouns, the gender-fluid use of which Woolf may have pioneered a hundred years ago. This synchrony feels like fate.

In Woolf's feminist, modernist proto-fantasy, Orlando lives forever, passing through Jacobean intrigue, the reign of Queen Anne, the sex-hating Victorian nineteenth century, and the burning phosphor of the early twentieth. Bartlett's busy, deliberately unfaithful version brings events further than Woolf could: up, indeed, to the present moment. Corrin's punk-sprite performance—aging onstage from a fifteen-year-old lordling to an old soul—is by a mile the best thing about the production, recalling Tilda Swinton's air of cool mischief in the much beloved Sally Potter movie adaptation. Corrin has none of Swinton's alabaster abstraction, though. Their specific gift is a startling, electric now-ness; hair shaggy in a white-blond mullet, legs and arms coltishly akimbo, Corrin takes an often foolish production and shakes it into relevance.

Bartlett's primary theatricalizing tactic is to place Orlando among a chorus of Virginia Woolfs, all wearing identical glasses and cardigans, their auburn wigs arranged in low buns. They offer context, narrate events, and also play small roles: a Russian femme fatale, say, or a duke in duchess drag. The director Michael Grandage's production is spare, a complete departure from the lusciousness of the 1992 film. Orlando's frequently discussed stately home, which Woolf based on a country estate called Knole, has three hundred and sixty-five rooms, notably the same number as days in a year. We never see them. Here the set designer Peter McKintosh—another member of the all-male core creative team—asks us to imagine everything: he disguises the Garrick's pretty stage as a bare, black brick space, strewn with furniture and props. The point is to make us forget grandeur and to picture *time* instead. Corrin usually stands mid-stage as the action whirls concentrically about them. Bartlett and Grandage are clearly interested in the character as the pointer on culture's sundial, waiting through the turning years for women's rights (can a female

ILLUSTRATION BY MALWINE STAUSS

Orlando inherit her own house?), then queer acceptance, then trans liberation. This concept of Orlando as time's gnomon is both lovely and touching. Not all the show's ideas are.

Bartlett's dialogue can be a bit drippy, as when Orlando, never notably shy about seizing pleasure or adventure, is urged by the Woolf pack to "try words" or "try courage." Bartlett also peppers the play with pastiche. The script's preface says that each period should be "refracted through the verbal style of that epoch," so he offers tributes not only to Shakespeare ("Shall I compare me to a summer's day?" Orlando asks) but also to Pope and Rowe and Kander and Ebb. The resulting hubbub might have been fun if Bartlett's references weren't such a sausagefest. Instead of enjoying the Monty Pythonesque jumble, one notices how many times the words of male authors interrupt those of the lone female writer. Poor Virginia; she deserves, at least, an adaptation of one's own.

And there is a yet more intrusive voice. Instead of the novel's biographer conceit, Bartlett's tale-teller is the bustling nanny-slash-dresser Mrs. Grimsditch (Deborah Findlay), who bullies Orlando affectionately and delivers redundant exposition. In Corrin's klieg-light performance, we see the process of maturation itself, but Mrs. G. and the Woolfs insist on coddling Orlando—and, to some extent, the audience. Mrs. Grimsditch's jolly fourth-wall breaking struck many around me as hilarious. She rallies us; she infantilizes us. "1607? Anybody? Year of?" she shouts to the audience. "1607, year of the Great Frost Fair, boys and girls and everyone." This is of a piece with a certain British comic taste, but I do not like it when a show addresses a roomful of adults as though they were children. Come on: it's been a century since Woolf started this conversation; we can't pretend to be kids anymore.

Where I did not mind being treated as a child was at "My Neighbour Totoro," the Royal Shakespeare Company's tender adaptation of Hayao Miyazaki's 1988 anime. Created in collaboration with the company Improbable and Nippon TV, it is shaped with a sweet faith that an operatic running time (two hours and forty-five minutes) will work for an audience of six and up. Its own animating spirits—the director Phelim McDermott, the puppeteer Basil Twist, the designer Tom Pye, the adapter Tom Morton-Smith, and a longtime Miyazaki collaborator, the composer Joe Hisaishi—handle the beautiful, mysterious Studio Ghibli film by never hurrying, and sometimes even slowing down, its meandering, stately pace. They then add excitement by exploring the characters' tactility: what looked merely adorable in the two-dimensional animation becomes fully huggable onstage.

You need embraceable comfort, because the underlying story is difficult: the sisters Mei (Mei Mac) and Satsuki (Ami Okumura Jones) move with their father to the countryside in order to be close to their mother, who lies seriously ill in a nearby hospital. Four-year-old Mei goes exploring, and eventually stumbles upon three fluffy spirits of the forest. The biggest one Mei calls Totoro, a roaring bearlike creature with a busy schedule (we later see him at a bus stop, commuting, going . . . somewhere) who enjoys a midday snooze. Twist's design gives Totoro such jelly-like pliancy that he ripples and jounces; even when we see an immense, proscenium-filling version of him, we can imagine just how soothed Mei must feel, leaning into his soft, furry bulk. The other puppet creations are astonishing, too, including the flying Catbus (a bus that is also a cat, which makes perfect sense, if you think about it). The vicarious sensation of soaring in this magical, inflatable vehicle—one puppeteer bounces the creature's glowing tail several feet above his head—makes the entire audience clap with joy.

I brought a seven-year-old friend to "My Neighbour Totoro," and she diligently took notes. These included "funny," "bit boring" (the narrative lull before Totoro's appearance), and, cued by the quiet, anguished sequences at the hospital, "emotional" (spelled, with phonetic rigor, as "amoushnell"). As for me, the creators could cut a good thirty minutes, especially the stuff with the neighbor boy who wants to learn how to talk to girls. Who needs a teachable moment when there are monsters at the bus stop? "Totoro" isn't made for such petty moralizing. Totoro's message is *naps;* his message is *rain is wonderful;* his message is *cry a little;* his message is *fly*.

The last of the shows I barely dare tell you about: Punchdrunk's "The Burnt City." Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle's immersive version of the Trojan War is part warehouse party, part night club, part evening-length choreographic performance. The effective Punchdrunk formula—convert a cavernous space into a hundred meticulously designed "abandoned" rooms, fill them with movement scenes performed by dancers, then turn the audience loose to wander through the proceedings while wearing eerie white masks—doesn't change much from one show to the next. I've seen "Sleep No More" (2003), "The Drowned Man" (2013), and now "The Burnt City," and Barrett's visual references have stayed steady since the early two-thousands. Or, at any rate, that's what I found myself thinking after three hours of rambling around "The Burnt City"'s elliptical, moody, opium-den vision of Troy. Haunted-house vibes, check. A scene that looks like a silent version of "Brief Encounter," check. This time, the guy with the shredded abs was probably Apollo—but he could easily have been "Sleep No More"'s Macduff, or one of "The Drowned Man" 's several Woyzecks.

At the end of the evening, though, I got into a car with friends who had been wandering separately from me, and they immediately started gushing about dozens of scenes I hadn't encountered. Apparently, I'd never found the section (*building*?) where the Greeks—Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and the rest of that gang—were playing *their* scenes. I was furious with myself—three hours and I never managed to walk through the right door? Part of Punchdrunk's fascinating dramaturgy, reminiscent of open-world video games, is that a viewer constantly worries about what she isn't seeing. It tempts you into believing that there's something precious but undiscovered which might tie all its mysteries together. This was a good lesson to leave London with: Never assume that you've seen all the theatre has to offer; there might be another world around the corner where the true treasures lie. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

COLLUSION

"Saint Omer" and "Turn Every Page."

BY ANTHONY LANE

In November, 2013, a baby girl was found drowned on the beach at Berck-sur-Mer, in northwest France. Not long afterward, police arrested the child's mother, Fabienne Kabou, who was charged with murder. Born and raised in Dakar, Kabou was academically bright, and had come from Senegal to France, where she pursued her studies. She had moved in with a much older man; he was the father of the girl who died.

Kayije Kagame and Guslagie Malanda star in Alice Diop's film.

One of those who attended the subsequent trial, in the town of Saint-Omer, was the filmmaker Alice Diop. Hitherto, Diop's work has been in documentary; now we have her first feature, "Saint Omer," which is clearly and closely inspired by the case of Kabou, and which retains the attentiveness—the patient ardor—of a good documentary. Much of the movie is set in a courtroom, and includes not just lengthy scenes of cross-examination but also, more discomforting still, moments of suspended animation, as it were, during which one character stares or glares at another. The presiding judge (Valérie Dréville) is, quite rightly, the glarer-in-chief.

The defendant in the film is Laurence Coly (Guslagie Malanda), who, like her real-life counterpart, hails from Senegal and is highly educated. Calm of demeanor, she admits to having caused the death of her daughter, Élise, but finds it hard to explain how she could have done such a thing, saying, "I hope this trial will give me the answer"—words not often heard in the mouth of an accused person. The mystery grows; Laurence, we learn, told the police that she was the victim of sorcery, cursed by the "evil eye" and hallucinations. She also describes herself as a "Cartesian." (Warning: do not use that line, in self-defense, anywhere other than France.) Some of her statements, when she is caught out in prevarication, have the air of logical riddles. "If I'm lying, I can't know why," she says, to the frustration of the prosecuting counsel (Robert Cantarella).

Other characters take the stand. We meet the child's father, Luc Dumontet—frail, white, and very well played by Xavier Maly as a paragon of self-pity and slyness. (Molière would recognize the type.) Of his relationship with Laurence, he says, "I would go as far as to say that we were happy, at least in the beginning." *Ah, l'amour!* He found it convenient to keep her at arm's length from his everyday life; it was as if she, and their child, did not officially exist. We can sense "Saint Omer" beginning to mount the case for mitigation, and setting before us a young Black woman corroded both by subtle indifference, in the private sphere, and by a more brazen prejudice elsewhere. A professor, informing the court that Laurence aimed to write a doctoral thesis on Wittgenstein, adds, "Isn't it rather odd, an African woman interested in an Austrian philosopher from the early twentieth century—why not choose someone closer to her own culture?"

The proceedings are observed, from the gallery, by the tall and stately figure of Rama (Kayije Kagame). For the first fifteen minutes of the movie, we are given the deliberate impression that she is destined to be the heroine. We see her at work—she is a writer and lecturer—and with her loved ones, before she packs a bag and sets off to attend Laurence's trial. Most viewers will be asking themselves: what is Rama doing here, and what is her connection with Laurence? Well, there is no sign that they are acquainted with each other, and what binds them is empathy, as opposed to plot. Both women are Black, with a Senegalese background; both have (or had) a white partner, in France; both have tricky rapports with their mothers; and both seem simultaneously proud and bowed down by the weight of the world. One last link: Rama is pregnant, and understandably harrowed by the fate of little Élise.

In short, although Rama is not called to testify in court, she is there to bear moral and emotional witness to the saga of Laurence, as Diop was to that of Fabienne Kabou. Thus, when the philosophy professor takes her seat after giving evidence, Rama stares at her with silent and sizzling contempt. (If they were in a Marvel movie, the professor would burst into flames.) More ambiguous is the sight of Laurence turning to gaze, with half a smile, at Rama, who is thoroughly freaked out; is there solidarity in that smile, or a disturbing complicity?

How much we *need* Rama is another matter. Our reaction to events in court is bound to be nudged and shaped by

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA PARINI

hers, but one could argue that Laurence's story is so dramatically strong that it doesn't require such backup. It's as though Diop didn't entirely trust us to read the narrative as we should. That's why she shows Rama, at the start, teaching students about the French women who were paraded through the streets, with shaved heads, after the Second World War, for alleged collaboration with the Germans; as a bonus, we are then treated to clips from Pasolini's "Medea" (1969), with Maria Callas in the title role. Public shame, such as that of Laurence, is thereby invested with a certain nobility; infanticide is raised to the level of myth. In a closing speech, delivered directly to the camera, the defending counsel (Aurélia Petit) proclaims that all women are monsters—"terribly human monsters." All of them?

The most instructive thing about "Saint Omer" is what it omits. Fabienne Kabou was sentenced to twenty years in prison for killing her daughter, reduced on appeal to fifteen. The court was in no doubt as to the severity of the crime. Diop, however, chooses not to reveal either the verdict or the sentence; if you are unfamiliar with the original case, therefore, you might well believe that Laurence has been acquitted and set free. And that is pretty much what Diop, in this finely controlled and subtly controlling film, wants you to believe. (If you already regard the French judicial system as constitutionally racist, so much the better.) Her parable has its desired effect. Laurence, somehow liberated by the telling of her tale, is granted the dignity of a martyr, whose actions were driven by the forces of Western society, not sorcery. And, strange to say, you almost end up forgetting that there *was* a crime, and that a child, on a cold night, was left to die on a beach.

For reasons that elude me, book editors have never enjoyed the cinematic popularity of zombies, drug lords, and psychopaths. Why not? Could it be a lack of community spirit? Maybe sensitive viewers would be traumatized by the brutal slashing of a paragraph. Nonetheless, the imbalance needs to be redressed, and the best place to start is a new documentary, "Turn Every Page: The Adventures of Robert Caro and Robert Gottlieb." It details the professional alliance between Caro, the biographer of Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson, and Gottlieb, who has edited Caro's writing for half a century, and who now provides a crisp summation of their method: "He does the work. I do the cleanup. Then we fight."

The movie is directed by Gottlieb's daughter, Lizzie Gottlieb, who was forbidden, by her two subjects, to film them *in scribente delicto*, as they toil over a manuscript. "They said the work between a writer and an editor is too private," she tells us. (I sniff an opportunity here for an underground trade: basement peepshows, where you feed a nickel into a slot and watch one guy remove another guy's dangling participles.) Surprisingly, by the end of "Turn Every Page," the interdict is relaxed, and we get to watch this pair of noble gentlemen—whose combined age is a hundred and seventy-eight—stroll around the offices of Alfred A. Knopf, politely asking for a pencil, like elderly knights who have mislaid their lances. Even then, as they sit side by side and attack the typewritten pages of Caro's text, their conversation is elided, and overlaid with Chet Baker singing "Do It the Hard Way."

The way is still hard because Caro has yet to complete the fifth and final volume of the Johnson project. So all-consuming has this been that he and his wife, Ina, once spent three years in the Texas Hill Country, where he could root himself in the background of his subject. ("Can't you write a biography of Napoleon?" Ina asked.) Gottlieb, for his part, though aware of "heading faster and faster towards not being at all," waits and waits. His daughter's movie, ripe with charm, is all the better for its flecks of personal pain—tares among the wheat. What becomes apparent, for example, is that Johnson, Caro, *and* Gottlieb suffered deeply from the chiding of their furious fathers, who reckoned that their sons would come to naught, and who have since been proved magnificently wrong.

The audience for "Turn Every Page," I'd guess, will be a medley of Freudians, students of political muscle, and New Yorkers—each bearing a copy of "The Power Broker," Caro's 1974 book on Robert Moses, whittled down by Gottlieb to the size of a mere warehouse. Joseph Heller fans, too, will be left agape by the revelation that "Catch-22" was supposed to be "Catch-18" until Gottlieb upped the number. It is punctuators, though, who will be brought to the edge of their seats, roused by the single combat between the movie's heroes, both of whom, as Gottlieb says, "think a semicolon is worth fighting a civil war about." Only civil? Why not nuclear? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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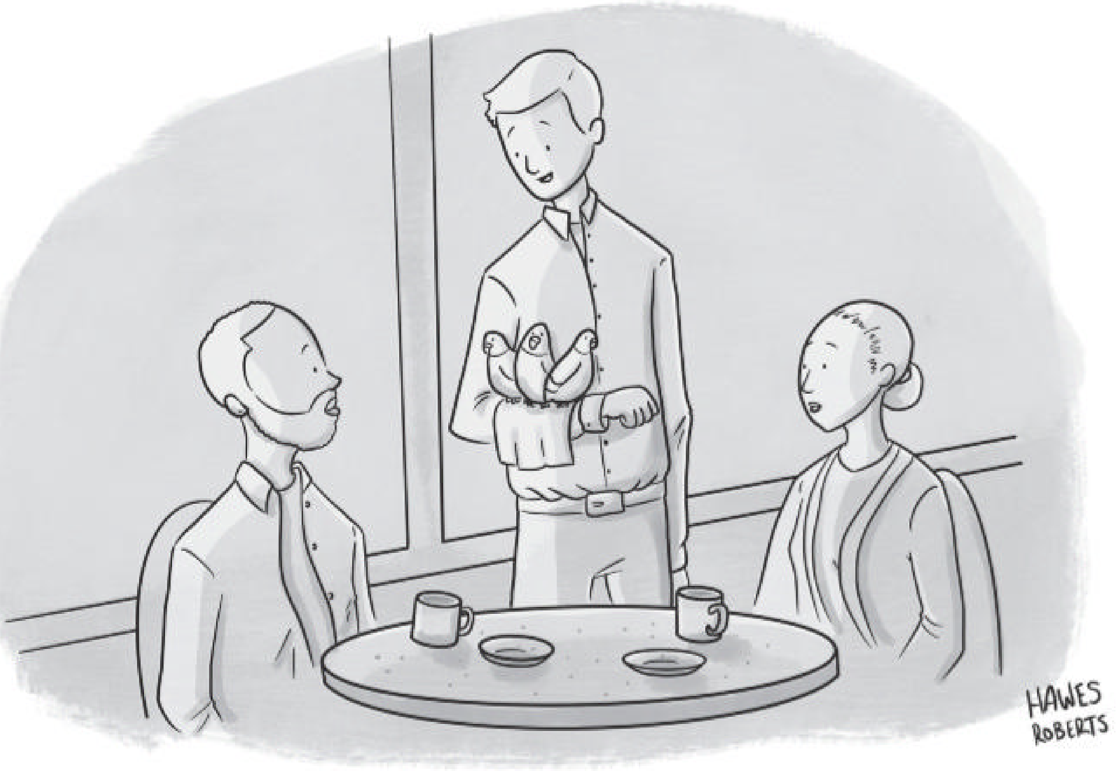
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

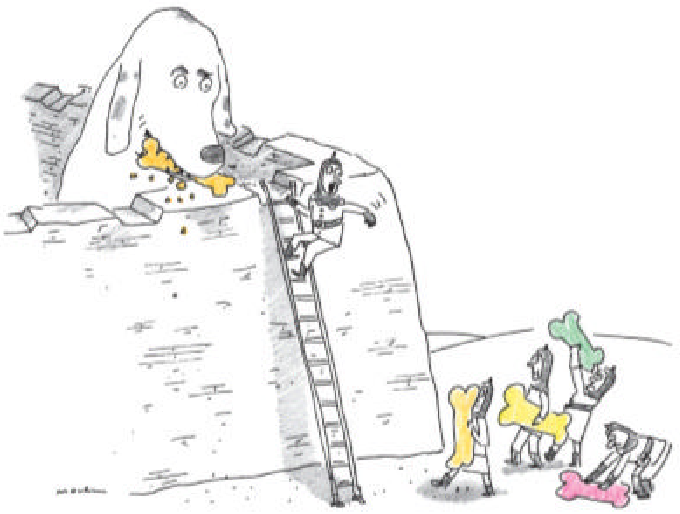
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Brian Hawes and Seth Roberts, must be received by Sunday, January 15th. The finalists in the December 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 30th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS

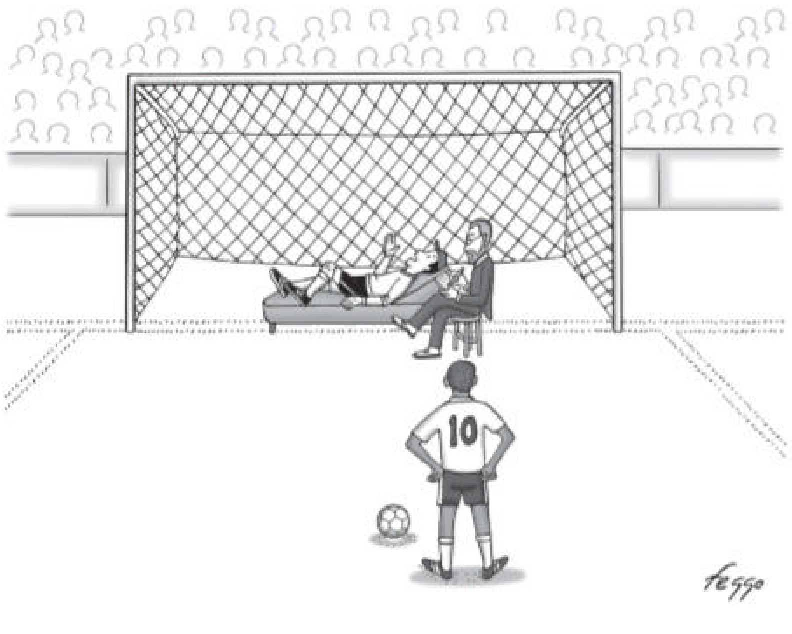


“Ready the tennis ball!”
Darren Gersh, Chevy Chase, Md.

“On the count of three, we s-t-o-r-m the c-a-s-t-l-e.”
Zack Vogel, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

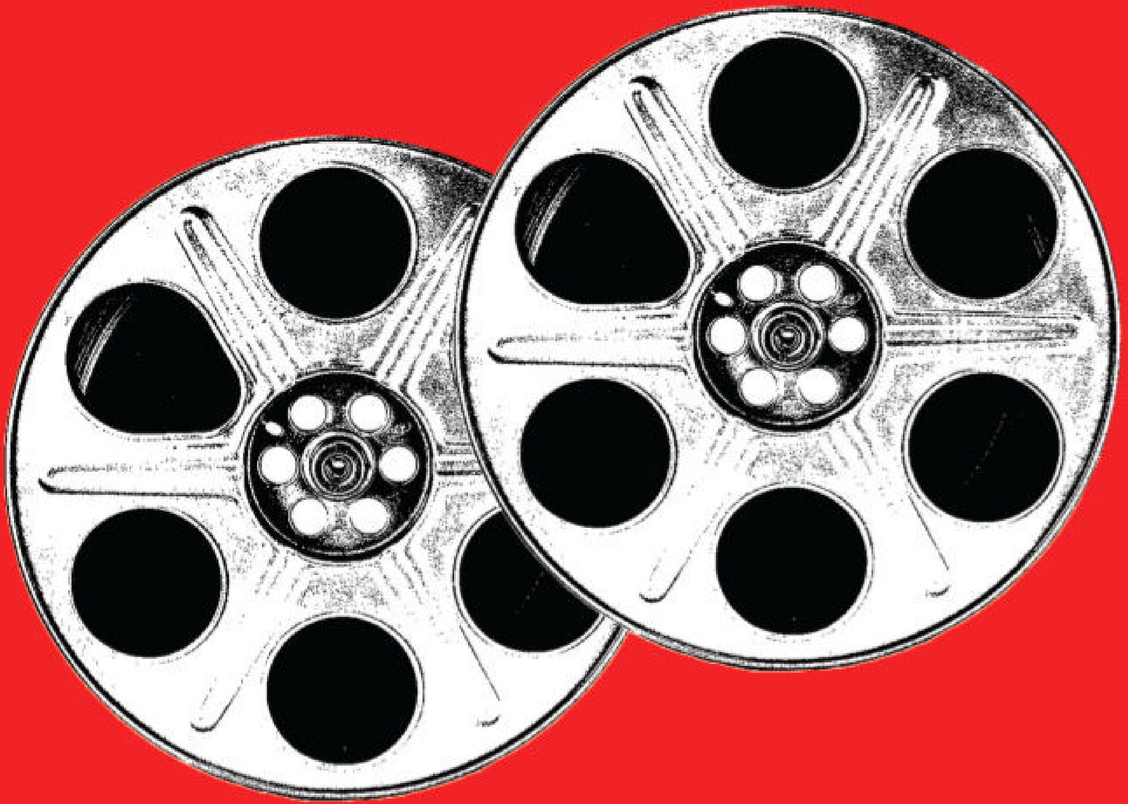
“Hold your fire—it turns out he's a good boy!”
Donny Dietz, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Well, of course I'm being defensive.”
Steve Arnold, Christchurch, N.Z.

Little
GOLD MEN



BY VANITY FAIR

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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY NATAN LAST

1	2	3	4	■	5	6	7	8	■	■	■	9	10	11
12				13					■	■	14			
15									■	16				
17								■	18					
19			■	20			■	21						
■	■	■	22				23				■	24		
■	■	25				■	26				■	27		
■	28					29					30			■
31			■	32				■	33				■	■
34			■	35				36				■	■	■
37			38				■	39			■	40	41	42
43						■	44				45			
46					■	47								
48				■	■	49								
50			■	■	■	51				■	52			

ACROSS

1 Word before comedy or arts

5 Raise many spirits?

9 ___ Soundsystem

12 Smoothness

14 Male guinea pig

15 Site of some Greek-Turkish sovereignty disputes

16 Words to someone struggling

17 Thing that's pulled over the bed?

18 Eats a *bissel*

19 Channel showing lots of pitches

20 Hobby-shop purchase

21 Bit of a trifle

22 Fudge, say

24 *Masago*, e.g.

25 Brass part?

26 Place to do one's bidding

27 ___ thrusters (means of spacecraft propulsion)

28 1977 novel whose protagonist is Macon (Milkman) Dead III

31 Animal sound uttered by Doja Cat more than fifty times in a 2018 viral novelty song

32 Cast

33 Galoots

34 Triborough, nowadays: Abbr.

35 They may show stories that have been adapted from page to screen

37 Continuously improve, in tech-speak

39 Workplaces for C.R.N.A.s

40 Substance in Michael Pollan's "How to Change Your Mind"

43 Mounts

44 Grow

46 Goes to bat (for), regardless of merit

47 The Sagrada Família and Sacré-Cœur, for two

48 Nailed

49 Writer whose account was first published as "Het Achterhuis" ("The Secret Annex")

50 Operator in Boolean logic

51 Team whose name rhymes with two others in the same metropolitan area

52 Closes

DOWN

1 What Mary Oliver compared to "an iceberg between the shoulder blades" in a 1992 work

2 Holds

3 Character who refers to her father as "the lunatic king"

4 "Who ___?"

5 Service centers?

6 Dawns

7 Jenny Xie, for one

8 Swing ___

9 Rakes

10 Home country of the Beti filmmaker and journalist Thérèse Sita-Bella

11 "Slaughterhouse-Five" setting

13 Band whose name was taken from a term in *TV Guide*

14 Outclass

16 First rap track to win the Academy Award for Best Original Song

18 They might be triggered by almond milk

21 ___ Rojo (Puerto Rican beach town)

22 "Pachinko" author ___ Jin Lee

23 Cybertruck brand

25 Person responsible for some monkey business?

28 Its shell can be pierced with a toothpick

29 Out

30 Booker T. and the ___ (instrumental soul band)

31 Body shot?

36 "Who ___?"

38 Epitome of thinness

40 Jacques who once advised a young psychoanalyst, "Do crosswords"

41 Last ___

42 Newspaper sections

44 Wind instrument?

45 Flag

47 "Take that!"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

A	T	E	■	■	D	E	M	I	■	■	G	R	A	B
T	W	A	S	■	E	V	A	D	E	■	L	E	N	A
T	O	R	N	■	M	E	R	I	T	■	I	N	K	S
I	S	L	E	■	O	R	I	O	N	S	B	E	L	T
C	O	O	E	D	■	■	E	T	A	L	■	G	E	E
U	M	B	R	E	L	L	A	S	■	E	W	E	S	■
S	E	E	■	L	E	A	N	■	B	E	E	S	■	■
■	■	■	P	I	N	S	T	R	I	P	E	■	■	■
■	■	J	A	M	S	■	O	U	R	S	■	A	R	C
■	D	A	T	E	■	B	I	G	D	I	P	P	E	R
C	O	Y	■	A	M	E	N	■	■	N	E	R	D	Y
H	O	L	Y	T	O	L	E	D	O	■	P	O	D	S
I	D	E	A	■	W	A	T	E	R	■	S	P	A	T
L	A	N	K	■	S	I	T	E	S	■	I	O	W	A
I	D	O	S	■	■	R	E	P	O	■	■	S	N	L

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